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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy & Science Fiction

AUGUST

BORN FROM THE BEAST
by Vance Aandahl

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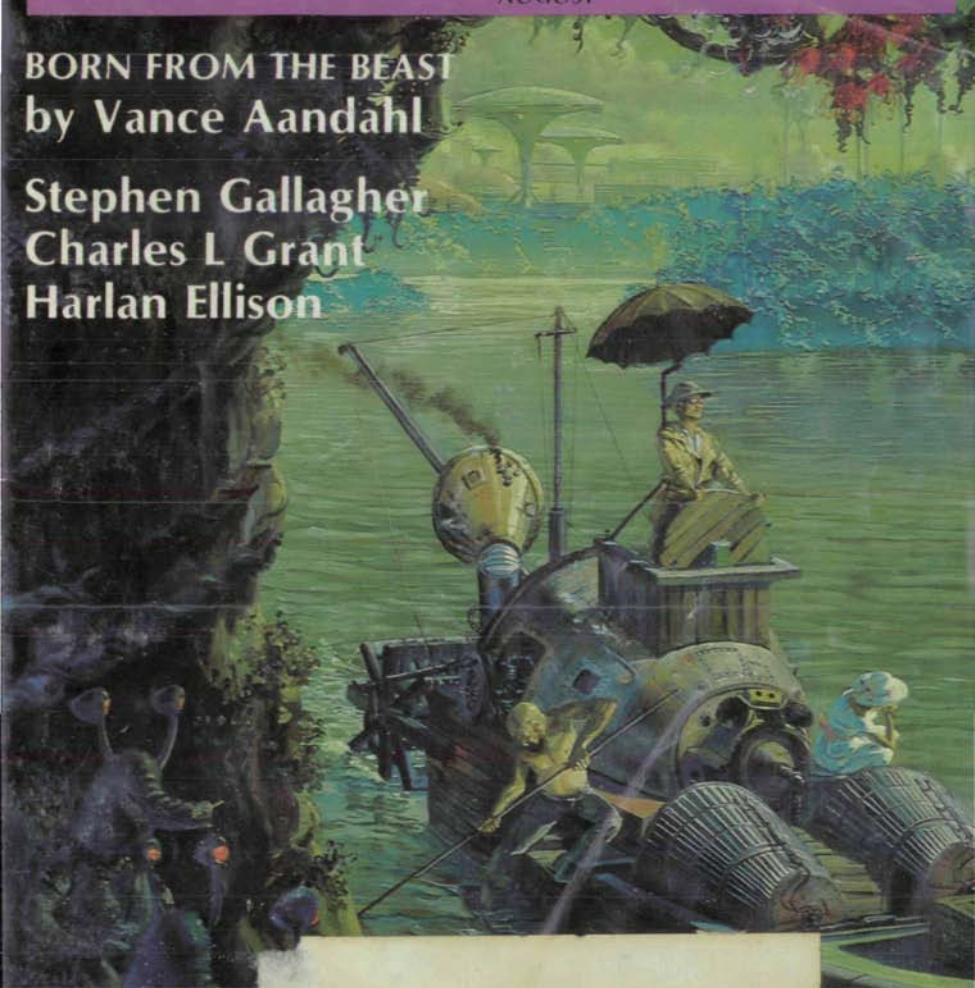

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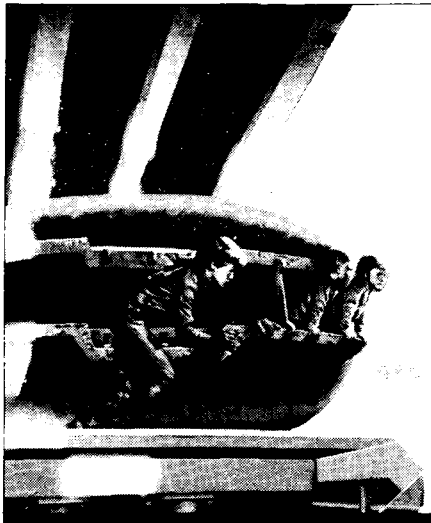

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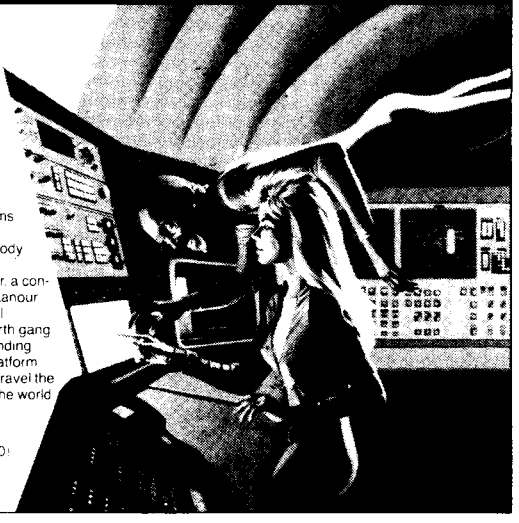

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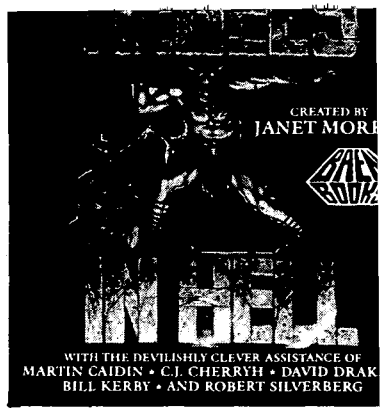
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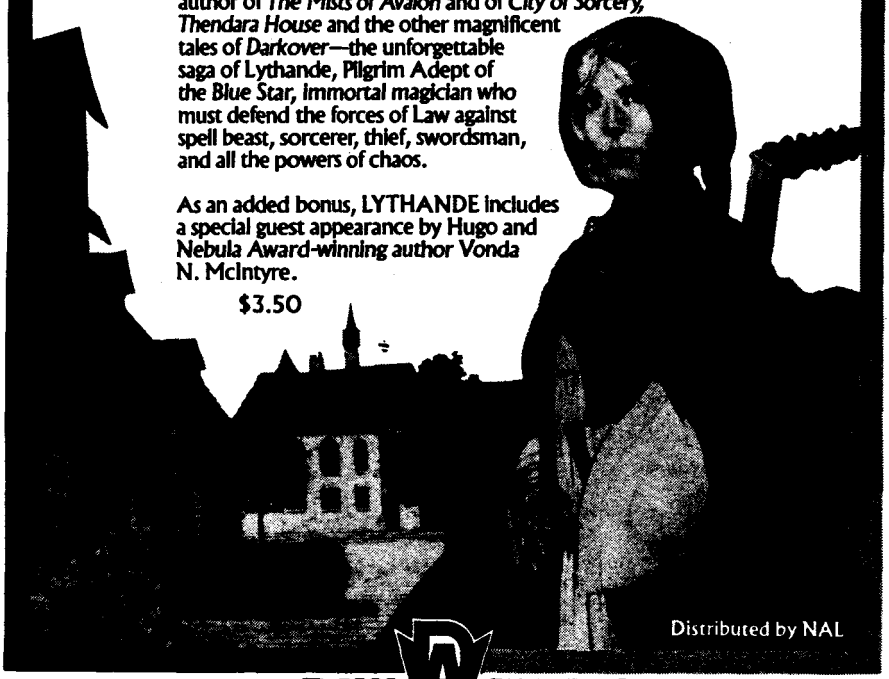

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The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction (ISSN: 0024-984X), Volume 71, No. 2, Whole No. 423, Aug. 1986. Published monthly by Mercury Press, Inc. at $1.75 per copy. Annual subscription $19.50; $23.50 outside of the U.S. (Canadian subscribers: please remit in U.S. dollars or add 30%.) Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy and Science Fiction, Box 56 Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Publication office, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Second class postage paid at Cornwall, Conn. 06753 and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A.

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Here is a wonderful SF adventure about two members of a lonely frontier colony — young Becky Laffoon, who is a monster, and an old-timer called Unbefrontable, who sees something fine in her — and what happens when a mysterious newcomer joins them in an expedition into the wilderness of the planet known as Misare XII.

Born from the Beast

BY
VANCE AANDAHL

Pity is cruel. Pity destroys.
Love isn't safe when pity's
prowling round.
— Graham Greene

I never saw a wild thing
sorry for itself.
— D. H. Lawrence

I

Becky Laffoon walked slowly down the path to the flats. After school a bunch of her classmates had run laughing and shouting down the path to play pipe war. She'd decided to follow them, but she didn't know why. It wouldn't work. It never did.

They all try really hard to be nice, thought Becky, but that's not enough. Or maybe it's too much.

She trudged along staring glumly down at the ground. A sudden movement in a thicket of jupiter ferns caught her eye, and she lifted her head. Tiptoeing off the path, she crept through the prickly fronds for a closer look. A possum-moth was squirming back and forth in its nest to shed its winter tentacles.

It's so soft and pretty, thought Becky. I wonder if it'll let me touch it.

Ever so slowly she reached out to stroke the possum-moth's rainbow-colored plumage, but it jerked its neck around and hissed in her face. Then it flapped out of its nest and disappeared into the dense treetop foliage.

The possum-moth was gone, but one of its old tentacles drifted down like an afterthought. Becky cupped her hands to catch the delicate blue

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streamer of xenoplasmic tissue, then watched it melt in the warmth of her palms. With a mutter she wiped off her hands and trudged back to the path.

The path twisted through the jungle. Tiny pools of moisture gleamed like eyes from the curls of leaves. Ripper-flies buzzed through the moist air. Mats of dead leaves squelched underfoot. Becky sulked through the gloom with her head down and her fists jammed deep in her pockets.

Around a turn, Becky saw three old droopas. They were gathering gasfruit near the edge of the path.

Becky loved droopas. The droopas who lived around Misare City were so soft and furry, she always wanted to put them on her lap and give them hugs.

"Gramsapple rillocoat?" asked the closest droopa, his snout trembling, his gill slits flexing.

Becky sank to her knees and offered her upturned palms to the three little blue creatures. "Seemfor natal," she said in her gentlest voice.

"Figroom veersack!" One of the droopas pointed to Becky's face, then hid behind the droopa who'd spoken first. All three of them leaped back and fled into the undergrowth, yelping with terror.

Still kneeling, Becky stared blankly down at the ground.

My face is so awful, even droopas run away. I'm a monster.

With a strange savage cry, Becky struggled to her feet and raced down the path as fast as she could run. Suddenly the brilliant light of the twin suns struck her in the eyes. She skidded to a halt and shaded her face with her hands. She'd emerged from the jungle. Before her lay the flats. On the far side of the flats stood five goliath trees, each nearly a mile tall and brown at the top like a stale cauliflower.

A novaplex pipeline carried sap from the trees across the flats and up through the jungle to the storage tanks at the Sapco refinery. Welding crews worked all year long repairing the line. They'd littered the flats with hundreds of worn-out, corroded pipes, each about twenty feet long and four feet wide.

Becky saw her classmates gathered near two discarded pipes lying parallel to each other some forty yards apart. Hing, Roberto, Bessy and Duk Loo stood atop one pipe facing Mbala, Satyajit, Braeme, Shakimar and Gretel on the other.

"Pipe War!" yelled Hing.

"Pipe War!" yelled Mbala.

"PIPE WAR!" roared Gretel, who had the loudest lungs in the class.

Gretel's team began to run in place, rolling their pipe forward across the flats like a crew of lumberjacks riding a log down a river. Shouting battle cries, the opposing team set their own pipe in motion. Faster and faster the two teams ran. Faster

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and faster the two pipes rolled toward each other. Graeme lost his balance and tumbled off with a shriek. A moment later the hurtling novaplex tubes collided with a TWANG and sprang apart.

Bodies flew in all directions. When the pipes came to rest, only Duk Loo still clung to the one while Mbala and Shalimar stood trembling on the other.

"We have *two* survivors!" yelled Gretel from where she lay on the ground. "You only have *one!* We win!"

"You cheated!" screeched Alexei. "You threw a rock a split second before the pipes collided! I had to duck or it would've hit me in the face! That's what made me fall! You're a cheater, Gretel! You *always* cheat!"

"If I'm smart enough to stay on a rolling pipe and throw a rock at the same time, then I deserve to win! You're just a lousy loser!" Gretel lurched to her feet and smacked the dust off the seat of her pants. "Our team's better than your team! We'll prove it! We'll beat you again!" With a snort of triumph, she whirled around.

There stood Becky staring at them with that face of hers. Shock and disgust flashed across Gretel's features. Then she turned away her eyes and put on a smile.

"Hi, Becky."

Becky didn't answer. Why bother? What for? She just stood there and glared at them.

"Hey, Becky," said Hing, "wanna play Pipe War?"

"Good idea!" cried Graeme.

"Yeah! We want Becky on *our* team!" cried Roberto.

Suddenly they were all chiming in with invitations. But not a one of them dared to look directly at her face. Not a one. Her face was off-limits. Forbidden country. No-man's-land.

"SHUT UP!" she screamed.

Silence. The only sound was her own panting breath.

"You don't want me to play." she said in her coldest voice. "If you wanted me to play, you would've asked me after school."

"I didn't see you," said Gretel, assuming an air of bewildered innocence. "But—"

"That's right. Pretend you like me. Pretend you were just *aching* for me to play with you. I'm sick of all your pretending. Everybody's so nice and sweet to me all the time, it makes me puke. You don't have to be so rotten snotty nice, because I don't like you anyway."

Becky was quivering now, shaking uncontrollably.

"I HATE YOU!" she shouted.

They stared down at the ground, all of them, afraid to say anything, afraid to look at her face.

Choking back a sob, she turned and walked stiffly away, back up the path into the jungle. When she was almost out of earshot, she heard one

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of them whisper, "Poor Becky . . ."

Who are they trying to fool? she thought, squeezing shut her eyes to hold back the tears. They don't like me. No one likes a monster.

II

Becky Laffoon's classmates were *so* nice. So nice she'd like to fry their eyeballs in goliath sap. During the past three months, they'd fed her enough false sympathy and phony kindness to make her throw up every hour of every day for the rest of her life.

More of the same lay in wait at the Sapco infirmary, her new home. The infirmary stood by itself halfway between the spaceliner port and the river. A triple-deck dome, it looked like a hairless pink tumor sticking out of the ground.

When Becky plodded up the ramp, the portal irised open to reveal her new mother — Dr. Belvedere, the neurologist. Dr. Belvedere was a stocky woman in her late forties with close-cropped gray hair and pouches under her eyes. She stole a quick glance at Becky's face, then gave her a hug.

"You've been crying, button."

"No I haven't."

"The other children — they've been teasing you again."

"No they haven't."

"I can tell."

"No they haven't. They were nice to me. They asked me to play. I just didn't feel like it."

"Well then, it must have been the *way* they asked. You mustn't let them upset you, button. What do they know, anyway?" Dr. Belvedere tousled Becky's hair and faked a laugh. "I have one more patient waiting in the dispensary. You come along, and when I'm through, we'll sneak down to the kitchen and see if Jack Rillstone's whipped up any jelly fluff."

"What sort of patient?" asked Becky as they floated up the air lift.

"Oh, nothing special. Just one of the lightgun welders from the Sirius freighter. Those roughnecks are always getting into trouble. This one broke curfew last night and sneaked down to the riverfront to smoke ratfungus with the droopas. He doesn't remember what happened, but he won't forget the headache."

They pushed out of the air lift and walked down a corridor to the dispensary. A rugged-looking man was lying on a cot with an ice pack on his forehead.

"That you, Doc?"

"Yes."

"Can you give me something to kill the pain?" He groaned melodramatically. "This ice pack doesn't help at all."

"I can give you a shot. It'll alleviate the pain and let you get some sleep tonight. By tomorrow morning you'll feel much better."

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Dr. Belvedere dug through a drawer till she found a pneumoneedle.

"I can also give you a word of advice. Misare XII is an unexplored planet: We know very little about the droopas and even less about the so-called lower life-forms. We *do* know that some species are aggressive and others poisonous. I don't think it makes much sense for a newcomer like you to go gallivanting around in the middle of the night. If you don't think it's dangerous, just ask my young friend here — she's a second-generation Misarean."

With a surly grunt he turned his head. When he saw Becky's face, his eyes bulged and his mouth dropped open.

"What the hell is *that?* Take care of *her* first, Doc. My headache can wait."

This amused Becky. She rewarded the welder with a nasty little laugh.

Aghast, Dr. Belvedere rushed over and embraced her, hiding her face so the man couldn't see it.

"I'm sorry, Becky. I wasn't thinking. Oh, button, button . . ."

"Don't be sorry. I like it when people are honest."

Dr. Belvedere led Becky into the storeroom, seated her on a stool, and gave her a back issue of a journal called *Alien Microneurology.*

"You wait here, button. I'll be through in no time at all. Then we'll have some jelly fluff."

Dr. Belvedere closed the door behind her, sealing Becky off. Becky discarded the journal and tiptoed to the door. With her ear pressed against it she could hear everything.

"That kid," said the welder. "She looks like something out of a horror vid. What happened to her face?"

"Sap burns. The family fuel tank exploded — killed her father and mother and baby brother. She's the only one who survived. None of the other colonists were willing to take her in, so we've adopted her here at the infirmary."

"Gee, that's a bummer. I didn't mean to be rude. She took me by surprise, that's all."

Dr. Belvedere made no reply. In the silence, Becky could hear the click click swoosh of the pneumoneedle.

"Isn't there something you can do to fix her up? Plastic surgery?"

"A scar left by a goliath-sap burn doesn't respond to reconstructive therapy the way a normal scar would. If you try to smooth it with a sander, it just grows back. If you try to cover it with a transplant — real skin or synthetic — it just absorbs the new tissue. Then all you have is a thicker scar."

"You mean she's going to look like that for the rest of her life?"

"Who knows? We've told Becky that Sapco Research and Development Center on Terra is testing a new treatment, but that's only a story to boost her spirits. Sapco's too busy

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making money to worry about a few burn victims."

"Gee. You'd think —"

"You'd think a lot of things. You'd think a certified lightgun welder would be smart enough not to poison himself with native narcotics."

"Aw —"

"If there'd been any spores in that ratfungus, you'd need a lot more than an ice pack and a shot of depracillin to cure your headache. Stay away from the riverfront. And when you're working on the pipeline, wear your safety armor."

"You don't have to tell me *that* twice."

"You can go now. I have a very busy schedule."

Becky was back on the stool, flipping through the pages of *Alien Microneurology,* when Dr. Belvedere opened the door.

"Button, button, who's got the button — *here's* my button! Ready for a big bowl of jelly fluff?"

"I'm not your button. And I don't want any jelly fluff."

"Becky darling . . . what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. I just don't feel hungry. Think I'll go for a walk instead." She made a nasty little snickering sound in the back of her throat. "By myself."

Outside the wind was singing. Becky ran all the way to the crest of the hill behind the infirmary. Standing there, she leaned into the wind and let the gusts whip her hair. She tipped back her head and stared straight up. The afternoon sky was foaming with lovely soft colors — greens like the underside of a wave, grays like a shadow on snow. But Becky clenched her fists in bitter rage.

"I'm a monster," she sobbed.

She raged against Sapco. She raged against Dr. Belvedere and her well-intentioned lies. But most of all she raged against herself.

III

From the top of the hill, Becky could see the whole settlement. It didn't amount to much. In forty years, mankind hadn't exactly tamed the Misarean wilderness.

To her left the spaceliner port lay on the verge of the flats, its scorched launch pads and loading docks surrounded by the bright orange tanks of the Sapco refinery complex. To her right a few bare spots in the carpet of jungle showed where the first wave of colonists had struggled to farm the unfarmable soil. On a bluff overlooking the river huddled the company town, a bleak little cluster of dodecaframe modules. The founding fathers had named it Misare City, but now everyone just called it Misery.

Droopa burrows honeycombed the riverbank below. Supported by a row of rotten piles, a half-collapsed wharf

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leaned over the soupy water. At the end of the pier stood a shanty of barrel staves, scrap novalex, and driftwood. That's where Unbefrontable lived.

Unbefrontable was short on table manners and long on body odor. He'd rather spin yarns about the first landing than take a bath. But he had a sense of humor. And he wouldn't turn his eyes away from Becky's face. He was the only one she could talk to now.

When Becky reached the shanty, she hesitated before the curtain of rags strung across the doorway.

"Unbefrontable? It's me, Becky. May I come in?"

"Enter at yer own risk."

She pulled aside the rags and stepped into the dark, cluttered room. Unbefrontable sat hunched over an empty sap drum he'd converted into a table. He was reading a sheet of paper and gabbling to himself, but after a moment he lifted his head and gave her a long, vacant gaze.

"He's gonna do it, Laffoon."

"*Who's* gonna do it? And *what's* he gonna do?"

"I'll tell ya who and what. Some tomfool Terran greenhorn named V. J. van Downey, that's who. Gonna pay me sixty zaks to take him up the river, that's what. Do ya grasp the purport of the situation, Laffoon? Yers truly is about to become a rich man. The sole director and beneficiary of a vast fortune."

"Sixty zaks isn't *my* idea of a vast fortune." Sighing, Becky sat down on a wooden crate and propped her boots on the sap-drum table. "Six hundred maybe — or six thousand."

"All depends," snapped Unbefrontable. "What's lasergame change fer a tomfool kid might jist be a fortune fer a wily old philosopher what knows how to spend it wisely." He gave her boots a sly tap with his cane. "A feller kin buy a tubful of slagberry brandy with sixty zaks."

"Yuk. Sounds like a good way to rot your stomach out. But tell me more. Who *is* this van Downey person, anyway? And what's he want to travel up the river for? Doesn't he realize there's nothing in the mountains but razor-ants and trouble?"

"Them questions is major mysteries, Laffoon. Muh new employer ain't told me any who or why — jist when, where, and how. Could be he's a smart operator what knows somethin' the rest of us don't. I figger it's more likely he took off his helmet in a decompression lock and been lookin' fer his brains ever since. Maybe the droopas sold him a treasure map. Any which way it don't befront me. I already seen the color of his money. Here — read this."

Unbefrontable handed Becky the paper, and she read it aloud:

"The remainder of my equipment has been removed from the Sirius freighter. I am eager now to undertake the river journey discussed in

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our previous meetings. As you know, I cherish privacy in my work and must not be disturbed by idle curiosity seekers, so I trust you have kept our agreement in strictest confidence.

"We leave tonight, but to avoid attention let us wait til moondown to bring my equipment onto the boat. You will receive twenty zaks when the boat is loaded, twenty when we reach the mountains, and twenty more upon our return to Misare City. But remember: payment in full depends upon your strict compliance with all my instructions."

The note was signed in a handwriting that looked flowery and effeminate to Becky: *V. J. van Downey.*

She let out a low whistle and handed back the note.

"Not very fussy, is he?"

"Nope. Ain't the least bit secretive either."

"What if he's a desperate criminal who committed some hideous mass murder back on Terra? He comes to a lonely frontier colony on the fringes of the Galaxy, hoping to escape justice, but Federax agents corner him in the mountains and gun him down with imploders. You lose an arm and a leg in the shoot-out and get sentenced to twenty years' hard labor on a mining planet."

"Hm. Don't sound half bad. Be a dee-stink improvement over life in Misery."

"You're not very good at keeping secrets, Unbefrontable. If this van Downey character finds out you showed me his note, he might not pay you."

"How's he gonna find out, Laffoon? Yew blabbin'?"

"You better believe it. I'm gonna telepulse the authorities and ask if there's a reward." She pulled her legs off the drum and leaped to her feet. "Where's the boat? Can I see it?"

"Don't know why not. It's tucked back under the pier so's it won't attract any of them idle curiosity seekers."

Outside, afternoon was melting into evening. Becky lay down on the planks and peered into the splashing shadows. One glance told her the boat had been built by the same hand that designed the shanty. Unbefrontable's latest creation defied all nautical logic. It was a floating junkyard — part raft, part barge, and part daydream. Across the bow he'd painted the boat's name in bright red letters: *Me Too.*

Back in the shanty, Becky whistled again.

"She's a beauty, all right. Think she'll make it round the bend before she sinks?"

"What yew come down here fer anyway, Laffoon? Jist to sass yer sooperiors?"

"Actually I was feeling depressed. I knew you'd be good for a laugh."

"Hmph. Poutin' over that ugly mug of yers, I spoze. Cain't blame ya none. If I looked like yew do, I'd either

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drown muhself or eat muh head. Ugly? Ugly ain't the word fer it. Laffoon — yer face is uglier than a bulldog's bottom."

"What's a bulldog?"

"I see yer ignorant, too. Bulldogs is critters they got back on Terra. Any dang fool knows that."

"If you're so smart, tell me what a bulldog looks like."

"Oh, they's all squashed down and wrinkly, and their snout been smashed in like ya whopped it with a crowbar, and they waddles round snortin' and snurfin' and shakin' their head so's these big gobs of spit come flyin' off and stick to everythin' in the immediate vee-cinity."

He paused to inspect a jagged black thumbnail.

"Of course that's jist the front. The other end's worse."

"I don't believe a word of it. I've studied Terran zoology in school. I know what bulls are, I know what dogs are, and I'm smart enough to know there's no such thing as a bulldog."

"Suit yerself. Folks with midget-sized minds been dismissin' Unbefrontable's insights as fabrications fer nigh onto sixty years now. It don't befront me. What I cain't understand is why yer down in the dumps. Thought Sapco wuz dee-velopin' a new surgical technique to whittle off them scars."

"They've been telling me that for the past three months, but I found out today it's just a lie to cheer me up."

"Suspected as much. Them high-falutin doctors don't know what they's doin' any more'n the rest of us. Now if I wuz yew, I'd give Old Three Arms a try."

"Old Three Arms? Who's Old Three Arms?"

"Ain't yew heard of Old Three Arms? Yew *are* ignorant, Laffoon. Old Three Arms is a famous droopa witch doctor what lives up in the mountains. Got an extry arm jist like his name sez."

"Bet he rides a bulldog, blows fire out of his snout, and performs great feats of magic."

"Yer kee-rect 'bout the magic, Laffoon. Back when I wuz a young buck, I seen him change a bladder-bat into a basket fulla knives. They sez he kin heal droopas what are sick and dyin' and such like. Wouldn't sprize me. Wouldn't sprize me at all. Spoze he ree-cited some fancy incantation and turned that ugly mug of yers into a purty little face again — wouldn't that be dandy? Me and this van Downey is headed fer Old Three Arms's stompin' grounds. I'll ask him about face jobs when I git there — *if* I git there, and *if* he's still alive, and *if* I happen to run across him."

"If, if, if," sighed Becky. "My whole life is one big if. Tell me about this witch doctor's third arm."

"Weirdest thing I ever saw. That dang arm hangs right off the middle

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of his chest. I reckon it's hooked up to his heart and that's what gives him all his magical powers. Wouldn't mind havin' one muhself."

"I can see it now. You could scratch your back, pick your nose, and swat ripper-flies all at once. Think of the time you'd save."

"Speakin' of time, Laffoon, it's time fer yew to skedaddle back to that infirmary. If I wuz some good-fer-nothin' lazy drunk old derelict, we could sit here and chew the fat all night long, but I been employed as a riverboat captain, and I got important work to do without some tomfool kid underfoot pesterin' me with dumb questions and insolent ree-marks."

Becky left the shanty, then thrust her head back through the rags.

"They say it's dangerous in the mountains. You'll be careful, won't you, Unbefrontable?"

"Holy con carne, Laffoon, it's dangerous in a *bathtub*! Now git on outta here."

IV

Becky darling," said Dr. Belvedere, "you mustn't think I'm angry. You know I care a lot about you, button, and when the suns went down and you still hadn't come back — well, I was worried, that's all."

But Becky detected neither anger nor worry in the neurologist's voice, just weariness. For three months, Dr. Belvedere had struggled unsuccessfully to cheer Becky up, and the effort had exhausted her emotions.

"Anyway, I can't blame you for wanting to be by yourself. Not after what that lightgun welder said. Sometimes a long solitary walk is the best medicine of all. Where'd you go?"

Becky shrugged. "No place in particular. Just around. Down by the river for a while."

"Well, I'll bet you've worked up an appetite. When you didn't show up for dinner, I told Jack Rillstone to keep a plate warm for our button. It's one of your favorites — nickel-fish fillet. And he saved you a big bowl of jelly fluff, too."

They stepped into the air drop and floated down to sublevel four. No sooner had they found a clean table in the dining hall than two men converged on them, the cook from his kitchen and Dr. Pom, the staff psychologist, from a side corridor.

"Hi there, Becky," mumbled the cook, keeping his eyes away from her face while he served her a tray.

"Hi, Jack . . ." But he was already gone.

"I see our wayward damsel has returned," quipped Dr. Pom, straddling a chair so that he faced Dr. Belvedere rather than Becky.

"With the smell of that nickel-fish wafting through the ventilation ducts, how could she stay away? You better gobble it fast, button, before I decide

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to enjoy a second helping at your expense."

While the doctors kept up a stream of jolly chatter, Becky picked at her food and wondered what they had in mind. If Dr. Belvedere was her new mother, then Dr. Pom was her new father. Normally he avoided her, so she knew he hadn't joined the party just to pass the time of day. He was a prematurely bald young man with papery white hands. On the rare occasions when he spoke to her, he'd been about as frisky as the dead nickel-fish on her plate. Tonight, though, he was straining to seem carefree and effervescent.

Suddenly they shifted their chairs to confront Becky. Dr. Belvedere stared at a point just beyond her right ear, while Dr. Pom looked straight at her face but kept his eyes unfocused so he didn't really see it. This trick had the added advantage of making him seem abstracted in deep thought.

"You've hardly touched your meal, Becky," said Dr. Belvedere. "Something's still troubling you, isn't it?"

Becky toyed with her jelly fluff, spooning it from one side of the bowl to the other.

"I wouldn't be very hungry either," confided Dr. Pom. "Not after the day *you've* had. Dr. Belvedere told me all about it, Becky, and do you know what amazes me? I'm not surprised by the insensitivity of that lightgun welder. People like him need to compensate for their feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. No, Becky, what amazes me is the maturity *you've* shown. You're a remarkable young lady. We've all been impressed by the way you've coped with things."

Things, thought Becky.

Dr. Pom tapped his delicate white fingertips.

"Unfortunately, most youngsters your age aren't as mature as you are, Becky. Needless to say, we've kept in close touch with your teachers, and we know how thoughtless some of your classmates have been. Thank goodness you possess the intelligence and maturity to shrug off their antics and concentrate on your studies. You've adjusted very well, Becky — very, *very* well. But your presence has been most distracting and disruptive for the *others*. To be perfectly frank, now we're concerned about *them*."

He hesitated again. Becky sensed impending doom.

"What is it? You don't have to beat around the bush. Tell me."

"Well, Dr. Belvedere and I have discussed the matter at some length with your teachers, and we all agree it might be better for your classmates — the ones who just aren't mature enough to cope with this sort of thing — if you were to . . . uh . . . to continue your studies here at the infirmary rather than . . . uh . . ."

"You mean I can't go to school?"

"Don't be alarmed, Becky. There will be no lapse at all in your educa-

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tion. Your teachers have provided us with a complete set of study plans and—"

"I want to go to school! I don't want to stay here all day and study by myself!"

"But Becky," interjected Dr. Belvedere, "you won't be by yourself. I'll be here, and the rest of the staff, and we can help you—"

"No! I don't want to be cooped up inside all day like some freak that nobody can stand to look at!"

"Becky darling," gushed Dr. Belvedere, "please don't be so angry. You know how much we love you. We wouldn't do this if it weren't for the best. Please, button, just try to calm down and eat your jelly fluff and think it over."

Becky glared at Dr. Belvedere. All she could see were the thick, heavy pouches under the neurologist's eyes. She wanted to reach out and pinch them. Maybe they'd spurt jelly fluff.

"NO!" she screamed. "You can't bribe me with baby talk and sweets! I *won't* let you lock me up!"

Seizing the bowl, she leaped to her feet and held it like a weapon. Dr. Pom flinched and flung up his papery white hands to protect himself. Dr. Belvedere gasped, her eyes wide, her mouth ajar.

Becky wanted to smash the dessert into their faces, but instead she hurled it wildly across the room. The bowl ricocheted out of a corner and clattered across the tile floor. A glob of jelly fluff clung to the wall, then slid down the shiny surface like a giant amoeba.

The doctors started up from their chairs, but Becky shoved the table into their waists and they both fell back. As she ran for the door, she heard Dr. Belvedere wail at Dr. Pom in a voice shrill with hysteria:

"You idiot! I *told* you this would happen!"

V

Hiding deep in the jungle, Becky listened to the doctors calling, begging her to return.

"Where are you, Becky?" cried Dr. Pom. "Can you hear us? Are you all right?"

"We want to talk with you, Becky!" pleaded Dr. Belvedere. "Please come out! We're sorry, Becky! We want to help you!"

With a shudder, Becky crouched down in the undergrowth. She'd rather die than slink back to that cage of pity. Stone-still, she waited for the coaxing voices to pass. They echoed around her like a sad little song, rising and falling, plaintive and tired. Finally they faded out of hearing in the distance. She wrapped her arms around her legs and rocked herself from side to side in the darkness.

"Button, button, who's got the button?" she hissed under her breath.

"Button, button, who's got the

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button?" she crooned, reaching up to touch herself, brushing her fingertips over the ropy knots of scar tissue that covered her face.

"Button, button, who's got the button?" she moaned.

Over and over again she repeated the same words till they had no meaning at all. Gradually she chanted away the tension in her body. Her skin stopped bristling. Her muscles relaxed. She lay down on a soft bed of moss. Her eyelids drooped, languid and heavy. Slowly she let herself slip into sleep.

She dreamt she was standing at the end of a pier on the shore of a lake. Her father, her mother, and her baby brother sat in a rowboat eating a picnic lunch. When her father saw Becky, he stood up, rocking the boat, and waved giddily, beckoning her to join them, but the boat had no oars and drifted away toward the center of the lake.

She leaped off the pier and swam through the air till she hovered overhead. Her father tipped back his head to watch her, his eyes widening in amazement. She floated down to sit beside him. He handed her a sandwich, but it dropped through her fingers. The bread fell apart, spilling hundreds of tiny buttons. When she bent to scoop them up, they turned into ripper-flies — injured ripper-flies with burned wings and broken legs. She remembered she was a nasty little girl and did the nasty thing to do —stomped her boots till the bottom of the boat was dark with a greenish purple paste.

When she raised her eyes, her family was gone. She looked frantically around till she spied them standing on the pier. Her mother cradled the baby in one arm and waved the other. Her father waved three arms, the two she knew and a strange new one that grew out of his chest and extended over the water, straining to reach her. He was shouting something, calling her back, begging her to join them, but she couldn't hear the words. The boat picked up speed and carried her away toward the center of the lake, and she stared in horror as the distant figures dwindled to specks and disappeared from sight.

A vicious laugh made her turn. The boat seemed larger now, a garbage scow filled to the brim with nickel-fish guts and rancid jelly fluff. The aft was jam-packed with jeering children — Gretel, Hing, Mbala, all her classmates. They pointed at her, peering over the heap of reeking garbage, snickering, exchanging lewd winks, nudging each other in the ribs. She looked down and saw she was naked. When she tried to cover herself with her hands, they all roared with laughter.

Suddenly Becky realized her body was exposed but not her face. The greenish purple boot-stomped ripper-fly paste had crawled up her neck and coated her face like a rubber

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mask or a thick, wet scab. It concealed her features and kept her safe. Gretel and the others could laugh and point all they wanted. She didn't mind. It didn't matter They didn't know who she was. They hadn't seen her face and they never would.

Unashamed, she stood and stretched. Then she fixed them with a baleful look and started toward them, striding straight into the cargo bed of the scow, wading calf-deep through the slimy garbage, approaching them with a deliberate, unhurried, manacing confidence. After each step she felt transformed. She was changing into something other than herself, something alien and awful, something *really* nasty, something that loomed over them like a huge beast, and she could read the change in Gretel's eyes as a strident giggle froze on the big blonde girl's lips and she quailed back, quaking with fear, and fell out of the scow into the water and sank like a rock.

Becky awoke drenched in cold sweat. She moaned and hugged herself. Even in my dreams, she thought, even in my dreams. I'm a monster. I'm a monster, I'm a monster, I'm a monster!"

She lay there shivering while the nightmare melted out of mind. Like all dreams, it was easily lost. Soon she remembered only the scow. Its ungainly image floated in the center of her thoughts long after all the rest had faded.

That boat, she thought, that boat. I can picture it as vividly as if it were real and I'd actually seen it.

They she remembered. It *was* real. She *had* seen it.

VI

Unbefrontable yawned. Slouched over the helm, he took another swig from his brandy jug and yanked out a whisker to keep his eyes open. In the darkness behind him, the paddle wheel churned the muddy water like a milkshake while his homemade goliath-sap engine wheezed its way toward an early breakdown. The two rhythms, paddle-splash and piston-chug, droned in his ears like a lullaby, and he felt his eyelids sagging again.

Another shot of that brandy wouldn't hurt. He tipped the jug and licked his lips. Not bad. Not bad at all.

Pulling off his boots, Unbefrontable shimmied his posterior into a comfortable position on a crate of van Downey's equipment, braced his feet against the wheel of the helm, and settled back to enjoy the sunrise while he steered with his toes. Through the long night the *Me Too* had labored upstream in total darkness. Now the world around her was about to be revealed.

A thin line of golden green light appeared on the horizon. Watching the glow wash upward, Unbefrontable recalled a sunrise he'd seen as a

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boy in Montana or Missouri or Mississippi or some such place back on Terra. Right now, five or six decades later and several thousand light-years away, he couldn't remember which of those M places it might have been.

He drowsed for a spell, then opened his eyes to a new day in a very different sort of M place — the swirling ash and jade of the Misarean sky, the bruise-blue tints of the jungle, the river eddies all chocolate-brown with sediment, and up ahead the violet mountain peaks reflecting the rays of the twin suns in a brilliantly iridescent dazzle of light.

Too much color, thought Unbefrontable. Too much light. Might do a heap of damage to a feller's retina. He preferred scenery of the drab and homely sort. Hoisting his brandy jug, he squinted into the flawed glass. The distorted image of a rawboned rapscallion squinted back.

"Almost gone," he grumbled, "almost gone," turning the words over like a pancake. Whether he meant the brandy or the man wasn't clear, but there was only a swallow left of the one and not much more of the other.

"Almost gone — but it don't befront me."

He drained the jug and tossed it over his shoulder. It hit the deck with a THUNK and rattled across the warped planks till it came to rest against the bulge of a sleeping bag. The bag wriggled, flexing like a cocoon, but what emerged was no butterfly.

"It is morning," declared V. J. van Downey, making the sunrise official.

"Yup. Hope ya had yerself a pleasant little snooze."

"You jest. With the racket of that vibrating contraption you call an engine, sleep is impossible — though I did manage to doze from time to time. In any event, I need only brief periods of rest. I have a strong constitution."

Unbefrontable blinked twice at that one. Van Downey stood knee-high to a ripper-fly and had the complexion of a moldy cheese. Then again, what he lacked in stature he made up for in pomp. With a toss of his head. he swaggered to the prow and gazed upstream like Columbus discovering America.

"We have made adequate progress," he announced, giving the first leg of the journey his stamp of approval. "I shall relieve you at the helm shortly."

Shortly, thought Unbefrontable as he looked down at van Downey. Yew kin say that again, yew pipsqueak. Shortly ain't the half of it.

"But first I must check my equipment. It would be disastrous if any of the watertight seals were broken."

Van Downey began a meticulous inspection of the cargo, prying and poking and sniffing his way through the stacks of crates that filled the boat from stem to stern. He'd nearly reached the engine when he bent to peer under a tarpaulin and sprang

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back with a yelp of alarm.

"There's something hiding there! It's alive!"

"Some sorta critter?"

"Yes! Hurry!"

Unbefrontable pulled on his boots, left the helm, and limped back through the cargo. Gripping his cane like a club, he stooped to lift a corner of the tarp.

"Be careful! I caught a glimpse of its face. It looks ferocious. Whatever it is, I am sure it is dangerous."

Unbefrontable drew back.

"Hm, Glad ya mentioned that. Got me one of them sonic pistols in muh duffel bag. Reckon I better go git it."

"Don't bother," came a muffled voice from the tarp. "I promise not to bite."

Becky crawled out and staggered to her feet.

"What *is* it?" shrieked van Downey.

"It ain't no it. It's a she." Unbefrontable snorted like a mule and whacked the deck with his cane. "Dang it, Laffoon, what are yew doin' here?"

"I'm a stowaway."

"Who *is* this person? What is wrong with his face?"

"*Her* face. This here's Becky Laffoon, and them's jist a few goliath-sap scars, nothing to git all discombobulated over."

"Hideous . . ."

With a shudder of revulsion, van Downey averted his eyes.

"Absolutely hideous . . ."

He stood there trembling, his arms pressed rigidly to his sides, then pivoted and grappled with Unbefrontable's shirtfront.

"What does she *want?* How did she sneak aboard the boat? How did she know about the expedition in the first place? Is she a *spy? Answer* me!"

"Don't be angry with Unbefrontable," said Becky. "It's not his fault. And don't worry — I'm not a spy. I stowed away after I saw the boat in a dream. I want to go to the mountains."

"Impossible! I cannot have you snooping around my equipment like this. What were you doing under there? And what about your parents? As soon as they —"

"I don't have any parents."

"Nonsense!"

"They's dead is what she means. Laffoon's family got kilt in the same accident what uglified her face. Now if yew ask me —"

"Nobody is asking you anything! How can I trust you after this breach of security? Do you really suppose I am gullible enough to believe that this . . . this *monstrous* child saw the boat in a *dream*? What a preposterous fabrication! Obviously *you* told her about it. I do not know what sort of conspiracy the two of you are hatching, but I am going to find out. Believe me, I am going to find out."

"Now jist simmer down. There ain't no conspiracy, and there ain't no harm in —"

"No harm! Don't you understand?

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Even if her parents are dead, someone must have custody of the little monster, and when they realize she is missing, they will look for her, won't they, and eventually they will discover that *you* are missing, too, won't they, and then they will put two and two together, my friend, and they will send a search party up the river after us. I will not tolerate it! The success of my work depends upon privacy! I must not be disturbed!"

He glared fiercely at Unbefrontable.

"There is only one feasible solution. We must turn around and take her back down the river. When we reach the outskirts of the settlement, we will set her ashore. With luck no one will see us. We will be able to resume our journey without any interference."

"Take me back, Mr. van Downey, and I'll tell everyone in Misery you murdered Unbefrontable and tried to kidnap me."

"What?!"

"I'll tell them you're a homicidal maniac and a drooling perverted cross-eyed child molester."

The little man's pasty features burned with rage. Speechless, he lifted his hands and shook his fingers at her.

"But if you agree to take me with you to the mountains, I'll help with the chores and fix the meals. I'm a good cook, Mr. van Downey. And I promise not to interfere with your work. It doesn't interest me at all."

He glowered at the deck, his face brick red, the veins throbbing in his forehead.

"Sounds like a bargain to me. If I wuz yew, I'd take her up on it 'fore she changes her mind and dee-mands Space Union wages, too."

"Very well! Threatened with blackmail, I have no choice. I shall accept the terms of this outrageous 'bargain.' But . . . but . . ."

Sputtering like the engine, he whirled around and stormed away to the front of the boat.

"Now dang it, Laffoon," hissed Unbefrontable, "why did you hafta go and pull a tomfool stunt like this? He prob'ly won't pay me now!"

"I'm just following your own advice."

"Run that one by me again. I don't seem to ree-collect —"

"Old Three Arms. I'm going to give him a try."

"Old Three Arms? But Laffoon, that's jist a . . . jist a . . ."

For a long moment they stared at each other. Unbefrontable chewed on his whiskers. The wham-bam music of the makeshift engine clattered in his ears like an accusation.

"Old Three Arms doesn't exist, does he?" Becky's voice was flat and hollow, empty of all feeling. "He's another of your tall tales, isn't he? You were lying, Unbefrontable — lying to give me a little pinch of false hope, just like all the others."

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"No sir! No sirree! I warn't lyin'. Maybe I wuz stretchin' it some, but I warn't lyin'. I seen Old Three Arms transmogrify that bladder-bat into a basket with muh own two eyes, Laffoon. It's jist that —"

"It's just that it wasn't real magic, was it? It was sleight of hand. A clever trick."

"Holy con carne, Laffoon, how kin I be sure? It *looked* real. Looked jist as real as white on rice. But dang it — they's a whole mess of things what looks real and flips over phony. Yew know that. Bee-sides, this wuz twenty, twenty-five, thirty years ago. No tellin' what mighta happened to that old droopa."

"Never mind. It's O.K. I don't expect to find Old Three Arms, and even if I do, I'm smart enough to know he won't make my scars disappear with a wave of his extra hand. The only reason I stowed away was to get out of Misery. I couldn't stand another hour with those mealymouthed hypocrites at the infirmary."

She reached out to pat him on the cheek.

"Really, Unbefrontable — it's O.K."

But he knew it wasn't.

VII

With no one at the helm, the *Me Too* had slewed off course, veering around in the torpid current till she was chugging downstream.

"We are proceeding in the wrong direction!" cried van Downey. "What do we do?"

"Looks like Mr. Know It All could use a hand, Laffoon. Yew keep yer trap shut now, and I'll learn you both to steer a riverboat."

Becky followed Unbefrontable to the prow, where van Downey was wrestling with the wheel. The little man's face was pale again. His beet-red rage had peeled away like a label.

"The river is too narrow," he complained. "If we try to turn around, we'll crash into the bank."

"Well now, that *is* a problem. If this warn't a first-class operation, we'd jist hafta toss in our cards. But we's equipped to outfox every dang deesaster this tomfool river kin throw at us — includin' the current contingency."

From a coil of rope, Unbefrontable hoisted a twisted knot of metal. It looked like a collapsed stanchion from one of the launch pads at the spaceliner port, but Becky wasn't sure. She knew the old riverrat had a multitude of salvage sources.

"This here's a delicate instrument referred to by us riverboat captains and suchlike navigational experts as the anchor. How's it work? Here's how. First we hollers, ANCHORS AWAY! Next we heaves the whole mess over the rail jist like we wuz sloppin' the hogs."

With a loud splash the metal pretzel hit the water.

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"Then we waits a spell, and if we's lucky, this cunning dee-vice snags a purchase on the river bottom what holds the front end of the *Me Too* in place whilst the current nudges her backside around. After that we—"

"You needn't continue your explanation," snapped van Downey. "The solution is so obvious, I simply overlooked it. Say no more."

But Unbefrontable said a lot more. No sooner was the boat pointing upstream and the anchor back aboard, than he launched into a lengthy discourse on "the fine art and sacred mystery of helmsmanship," teaching his pupils how to trace the deepest channel by the color of the water and the current's speed, how to skirt sandbars, how to anticipate hidden rocks and submerged logs by subtle ripples on the river's surface. He let van Downey steer for awhile, then Becky, guiding them past the salient hazards, quizzing them repeatedly, snorting with disgust at their mistakes. Finally he grunted, told them they were hopeless so it didn't matter anyway, left them in charge of the wheel, and retired to his hammock to sleep off the brandy.

Becky took the first turn while van Downey sat fidgeting on a crate, fussing with a length of hawser, sneaking glances at her face whenever he thought she wouldn't notice. He didn't impress her at all. Not one bit. Underneath that facade of pomposity and arrogance, an insecure little boy was trembling with fear.

Neither spoke. Piloting the *Me Too* settled into a dull routine, the engine droned in Becky's ears, and the changeful yet changeless flow of the water hypnotized her eyes. She was nodding into a trance when van Downey spoke.

"There is something I must say to you," he mumbled. "But . . . but I do not know how to say it."

Bending over with his head between his knees, he gazed down at the deck, afraid to look her in the eye. He spoke in a quick and nervous voice, combing the fingers of both hands through his pale blond hair, raking his scalp for scurf.

"An hour ago, when I discovered you hiding under that tarpaulin, I acted like . . . well . . . I just was not myself. You have to understand that I am an extremely high-strung man. This expedition is very important, you see, and I have been laboring under a great burden of stress. Sometimes it feels as though there were twenty different people inside me. Each one tells me to do something different. I do not know which one is myself. Anyway, I have been keyed up for months worrying about my work, and when you startled me like that, I said some things I did not mean to say."

"You called me a monster."

He groaned and shuddered as though she'd struck him with a club. Becky gave him a nasty little laugh.

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"You don't have to apologize. You hit the nail right on the head. Monster — it's the perfect word for me. I know what I look like."

"Please do not talk that way. *Please* don't." He picked frantically at the scurf lodged under his fingernails, then wrung his hands together in a gesture of helpless anguish.

"I *want* to apologize. I *need* to apologize. I *must* apologize."

"O.K. I accept your apology."

"Something else I deeply regret is the callous way I spoke about your parents. If only I had known . . ."

"It doesn't matter. They're dead. Nothing anyone says can hurt them now."

"But . . . but . . ."

Stammering, straining to find the right words, he twisted his arms around his legs and contorted his spine till he looked like Unbefrontable's pretzel-shaped anchor.

"You poor girl!" he squeaked.

Here comes another load of pity, thought Becky. I was hoping I'd left it all behind in Misery. At least he's not a pro like Dr. Belvedere.

Her grip on the wheel tightened. All he really wanted, she knew, was for her to cheer up a little so he wouldn't have to feel guilty. No dice, mister. She fixed her gaze on the river ahead and pretended he wasn't there. Finally he gave up his groveling and wandered away to finish checking his equipment.

All morning long, while Unbefrontable snored out a duet with the engine, Becky and van Downey alternated at the wheel. During her first break she found some fishing gear and dropped four lines off the starboard rail. By noon she'd reeled in a dozen fish of various sizes and shapes. Of course they weren't really fish, not in the Terran sense of the word, but that's what the colonists on Misare XII liked to call them. In any case the soft indigo flesh of their mud sacs was tasty enough.

Becky heated a pan on the engine, stir-fried a few of the juicier morsels, arranged them nicely on a plate, and presented them to van Downey as a peace offering.

"You kept trying to apologize this morning," she explained, "but I'm the one who owes *you* an apology. It was wrong for me to sneak aboard the boat, and even worse to blackmail you into letting me stay. Besides, I haven't even told you my reasons for wanting to be here. For all you know, I *am* a spy, just like you said when you got so angry. Only I guess I don't know what it is I'm supposed to be spying on."

He shot a strange look at her face —half laugh, half snarl — then winced and jerked his eyes away.

"I guess I'm just being silly. You know I'm not a spy. How could I be anything except a stupid little kid? Even my name is stupid. Laffoon. Rebecca Fiona Laffoon. Laugh-a-minute Laffoon. How stupid can you get? I

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stowed away because I couldn't stand the settlement anymore. No one back there liked having me around. My face makes people want to throw up. Then they feel super guilty and try to compensate by acting sorry for me and being nice. That's what I hate more than anything. I don't want to be pitied. I just want to be treated like everybody else."

Her voice broke and she uttered a muffled yapping cry — the absurd shorthand of grief. Wrapping her arms around her chest, she spat into the river. From both banks a tangle of dense blue foliage overhung the sluggish current. She sensed the darkness of the jungle closing in around her.

"I'm not explaining this very well. What can I say? Unbefrontable's a rude old drunk, but he's also the only person I know who treats me like a normal human being. So I decided to run away with him. Pretty stupid, huh? Selfish, too. I didn't even think about you and your feelings, Mr. van Downey."

Suddenly he looked at her again. This time he didn't jerk his eyes away. He was shivering, and a trickle of sweat ran down his forehead and collected in a droplet at the tip of his nose, but he stared straight at the scars that covered her face, and he didn't flinch.

"I understand," he whispered hoarsely. "I know exactly what you mean."

Then he cleared his throat.

"Thank you for preparing lunch Becky. It smells delicious. You'd better cook some for yourself and the captain, too."

VIII

Late in the day a mass of thunderheads gathered behind the mountains, piling up like a second range. Lightning crackled across the horizon, illuminating sheets of blood-red rain. From fifty miles away, Becky could hear the immense breathing of the wounded sky.

Van Downey and Unbefrontable stood beside her in the helm, watching the storm approach.

"Awesome — absolutely awesome,"

"Yup. Looks like a gullywasher fer sure. Reckon we better sit tight till she blows over. 'Bout time to pitch camp fer the night anyway."

They turned into a backwater, battened down the cargo, and waded ashore. Not far from the bank Unbefrontable found a clearing. As the wind began to howl, they set up their bush tent and crawled inside. Van Downey was adjusting the photofactors in his stormlight when the rain came blasting down.

Under the downpour the tent sagged askew. Unbefrontable and van Downey braced the frame while Becky huddled over the stormlight feeling useless. A flash of lightning cast an

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eerie glow through the fabric, and the thunder-rumble made her jump. Unbefrontable shouted something at her: she saw his lips move, but the roar of the torrent drowned out his words. Her head ached from the noise.

Suddenly the storm departed, crashing off through the jungle like an army of blind giants. Silence rang in Becky's ears. Then she heard the friendly patter of a million wet leaves dripping on the tent, and her tension dissolved. Unbefrontable unzipped the flap and led the others out.

"Be sundown soon." He squinted at the sky. "Think we oughta find some wood 'fore it gits too dark? Be nice to have a campfire so's Laffoon kin cook some grub."

"There is an abundance of dead wood." Van Downey gestured toward a broken branch. "But all of it is much too wet to burn."

"We kin git it started with a shot of goliath sap. Prob'by spew out jist enough smoke to keep the bugs and whatnot from takin' up residence in yer hair. Laffoon, dogtrot over to the boat and see if yew kin scrounge up somethin' what looks halfway edible in that chest fulla vittles."

Becky ran to the *Me Too* and pawed through the provisions till she'd gathered up a big stewpot, some plates and spoons, a bag of droopa rice, and several delicacies from Terra — a tin of ham and a packet of dehydrated sweet potatoes. She hurried back to the clearing, but the men were gone.

That's strange, she thought. Maybe they're searching for a place where the wood's not so wet.

Feeling uneasy, she stored the foodstuffs in the tent and sat down on a rock to wait. Fading daylight dappled the clearing with rainbow and shade. Drooping from the downpour, exotic blue fronds glistened with moisture. Most of the ferns were of a species unfamiliar to Becky. It struck her that this jungle was not the same jungle as the one she knew so well. Until today she'd never ventured more than a few miles from Misery. Now she was far away, deep in the wilderness, and her her surroundings suddenly appeared weird and foreboding. How little she knew about the life-forms of her own planet!

As the twin suns set, first one, then the other, a hush fell over the clearing. A single ripper-fly flashed through the dusk, then everything was perfectly still.

Or was it?

For a split second, Becky thought she saw something moving in the corner of her eye, something indistinct at the edge of her vision — the shadow of a shadow stirring in the gloom.

She froze.

Holding her breath, she strained to perceive whatever it might or might not be. A dark profusion of foliage compassed the clearing. The dim outlines of creepers and shrubs assumed a thousand grotesque shapes in her

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imagination, but none of them moved.

She was just starting to relax when she heard a low but unmistakable belch.

"Unbefrontable? Mr. van Downey? Is that you?"

Silence.

The muscles of Becky's chest tightened like a vice, threatening to snap her ribs.

There's no need to panic, she told herself. I have to stay calm and control my emotions. I don't know what's out there, but it's probably just as scared of me as I am of it.

Don't con yourself with clichés, sweetheart, replied the other half of her mind, the deeper half, the half that wanted to scream and hide under the covers. Something's decided to pay you a visit. Whatever it is, it's *not* afraid. If it were, it never would have come this close.

She remembered the lurid tales old-timers had told her about the predators of the wilderness . . . giant land eels so voracious they could swallow you in a single gulp . . . parrot wasps with a sting so virulent it ruptured your eyeballs and peeled off your skin . . . red-beaked strafers with talons so powerful a casual squeeze could crush your skull . . . .

If it comes any closer, I'll stare it in the eye till it backs down.

Don't be a dummy. You're exposed out here. Hide in the tent!

What good will that do? My only chance is to run for the boat.

Numb with fear, Becky rose from the rock. Just then she heard the most wonderful sound in the universe — her companions' voices coming from behind her. Her heart soared, but before she could turn to greet them, a huge hairy form undulated out of a thicket and loomed over her in the center of the clearing.

At the same instant a high-intensity beam from the stormlight struck the creature directly in the face. Snarling, it swung a tentacle back and forth through the air, trying to knock the beam away. Becky glimpsed a tightly coiled proboscis, a triple set of metallic green mandibles, a cluster of phosphorescent purple eyes, cold and mindless. With a shrill groan the creature shimmied sideways into the darkness.

Becky's head spun and her knees buckled.

Van Downey came running round the periphery of the clearing, the stormlight bouncing in his hand. The creature loomed overhead again, swaying like a cobra, spraying Becky with glutinous strands of spittle. Somewhere far away, in a voice diminished by the buzzing in her brain, Unbefrontable shouted, "Duck, Laffoon, ***duck!***"

As she dived behind the rock, Becky heard the chicka chicka WHOMP of his sonic pistol. The creature staggered back, stunned by the impact, then lurched forward, its mandibles drooling, its proboscis extended.

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As its tentacles reached out to seize her, a pencil-thin ray of sizzling pink radiance played across the creature's thorax, and it shrank back with a deflating cry like the rush of air from an untied balloon. When it tried to slither away, the pink ray touched it again, and this time it sank to the ground without a sound, its body sagging into a shapeless mass, its insides liquefied. For a few seconds it twitched and palpitated. Then it lay still, dead to the bone, a steaming heap of offal.

"What was *that*?" whispered Becky.

"Don't rightly know the scientifical name," said Unbefrontable, poking the carcass with his cane. "Used to call 'em gorilla roaches in the old days. Ornery critters. But what *I'd* like to know is how the dang thing wound up lookin' like an undercooked omelet. Didn't think muh sonic pistol packed that kinda wallop."

Van Downey stood between them. In one hand he held the stormlight. In the other he clasped a slender silver cylinder.

"It is indeed a mystery," he said softly. "Whatever force destroyed this monster must be terribly powerful. Terribly powerful . . . ."

With a strange smile he slipped the cylinder into his pocket.

IX

After a brief conference they decided to forgo the comforts of the bush tent. Having a two-ton corpse in the front yard was the clincher: it looked bad and smelled worse. Besides, they'd rather not be in the neighborhood if a relative of the dearly beloved showed up to pay his last respects.

So they took down the tent and retreated to the *Me Too* to dine on cold mud sacs. When they retired for the night, Unbefrontable hung his hammock between a pair of crates, van Downey unrolled his sleeping bag on the clammy deck, and Becky curled up in a spare tarp.

Under the first lime-green light of dawn, they chugged out of the backwater and headed upstream. As soon as van Downey took the helm, Becky bombarded Unbefrontable with questions.

"Did you see that weird little gadget he had in his hand last night? Do you think he used it to kill the gorilla roach?"

"Wouldn't sprize me none."

"But what is it? Have you ever seen anything like it before? It's not a regulation imploder, that's for sure. Do you suppose it could be some sort of top-secret military weapon?"

"Looked like a nefarium untranosis beam to me."

"You're kidding! Nefarium weapons have been outlawed for nearly a century!"

"That don't mean they ain't a few of 'em floatin' around."

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"Well, who is Mr. van Downey, then? A bad guy? A Federax agent? Or what?"

"Don't rightly know, but—"

"What do you think about him anyway? First I hated him, then I started to like him, and now I'm not so sure. It's hard to explain, but knowing he saved my life last night is sort of irritating. It makes me nervous. It's like a debt I can't pay. Do you know what I mean? Am I making any sense at all? Do you think he's O.K. or—"

"Slow down, Laffoon. Yew got that mouth of yers goin' like the business end of an eggbeater. Makes muh head hurt. Bee-sides, I'm jist the captain. Ask him yerself if yer so dang curious."

That night they moored the *Me Too* to an islet in the middle of the channel, built a crackling fire out of driftwood, and feasted on Becky's Terran-style cuisine — ham pilaf with treacled sweet potatoes. Maybe it was the magic of a good meal, maybe it was just the glow of the embers or the music of the river, but something cast van Downey into a new mood. The tight little lines of his tight little face slowly relaxed, and his official smile softened into one that seemed genuine.

"Perhaps the attack on our camp last night was a blessing in disguise. It has forced me to reconsider our situation. The three of us are alone in a largely unexplored and dangerous land. In order to survive we must work together as a team. We must trust each other. But how can you trust me when I haven't even told you who I am or why I am here?"

He mused for a while, gazing into the fire. Then he looked up and shook his head in self-reproach.

"I have been a fool. I hope you will forgive me. I was so frightened, so fearful that outside forces would ruin the expedition. But it is the enemy inside my own thick skull that puts everything in jeopardy — my own paranoia, my stubborn refusal to take the two of you into my confidence."

He inhaled deeply, hesitated, then sighed and wrung his hands. He stared at the fire. Abruptly he chuckled.

"You see? Even now, when I am absolutely determined to tell you everything, it is hard for me to do so."

Unbefrontable started to speak, but van Downey cut him off with a chop of his hand.

"Let me tell you quickly before I lose my resolve. There is no such person as V. J. van Downey. I am Professor Malcolm Pointer, dean of Alien Archaeology at Barward Multiversity on Terra. Do you recognize the name? Over the years I have acquired something of a reputation, not only in academic circles, but also among the general public, for my excavation and study of the artifacts of the Pandumian Empire."

"Gosh! said Becky. "I *do* recognize the name, Professor Pointer. We learned all about the Pandums in

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school. They . . . they . . ."

"They were the gentlest, kindest species ever to colonize the galaxy. Their civilization was a wise one, Becky, a hundred-fold wiser than ours. They lived for beauty and truth and peace. They understood all the sciences, but the one science over which they gained complete mastery was agriculture. They sailed through the cosmos in their incredible seedships, bearing gifts of plenty to worlds torn by war and pinched by famine. Everything they touched blossomed and prospered and shone."

Professor Pointer's eyelids drooped like an iguana's, and his voice took on a soft and dreamy tone.

"That is why I have devoted my life to a search for the long-lost secrets of Pandumian food production. Their past holds the key to our future. If we knew what they knew, we could transform deserts into gardens overnight. No living being would ever go hungry again. Starvation would become an obsolete word."

"Don't sound half bad," said Unbefrontable.

"It sounds wonderful! exclaimed Becky. "But Professor, what are you doing *here?* My teacher says the Pandums never colonized Misare XII."

"That is correct. But about six months ago a remarkable document came to light. One of my graduate students unearthed a complete record of Pandumian shipping during the Thirty-ninth Dynasty. The record includes some data on a seedship that crash-landed on Misare XII and sank into a tar pit. Nearly 200 million years have passed since then, but there is an excellent chance the ship remains intact, perfectly preserved in its tomb of tar. And I have a set of precise coordinates for its location."

He paused to tap his fingertips together, then gestured upstream.

"It is waiting for us," he said. "There, in the mountains."

"Wow! Just think, Unbefrontable, if we help the professor dig up that ship, we'll all be famous!"

"Hm. Ain't sure I want to be famous, Laffoon."

The old river rat snorted through his nose, narrowed his eyes to slits, and gave Professor Pointer a close look.

"What I cain't figger out fer the life of me is why yew come sneakin' into Misery incognito. If yew really is some razzle-dazzle arkapologist, how come ya hafta use a phony name? How come ya hafta hire a ree-tired philosopher like me to lend ya a hand? Where's them graduate students yew wuz talkin' 'bout?"

The professor chuckled at this, but then his body jerked as though he'd just remembered something he didn't want to think about. The laughter died on his lips, and his pallid complexion turned a paler shade of white.

"Pirates," he muttered. "They will stop at nothing."

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"Pirates?" gasped Becky.

"Yes — pirates, raiders, grave robbers, call them what you will. Such men are totally unscrupulous, the bane and ruination of honest archaeology."

"I don't understand."

"The illegal market for antiquities is widespread, Becky. Wealthy collectors will pay thousands of zaks for a single Pandumian cenotaph. No wonder there are pirates who will slit your throat to get it for them. Pirates, Becky. They trample through a site, tearing it apart with their picks and shovels, wrecking everything except the artifacts they steal. Pirates have destroyed so many ancient treasures! They must not destroy this one. It is too important."

He swallowed hard.

"When I first discovered the shipping record, I could have announced the find to my colleagues and asked the multiversity to finance an official expedition. But if I had, every pirate in the Galaxy would know about it now. Those greedy ghouls! So I decided not to publicize my discovery. Using an assumed name, at my own expense I shipped myself and a minimum of essential equipment to Misare XII. I hope my tactics have fooled the pirates, but who knows? They are watchful and cunning as well as ruthless. We must expect the worst and be prepared. As you know, I carry in my pocket a formidable means of self-defense."

"Otherwise known," muttered Unbefrontable, "as a nefarium ultranosis beam."

"Now I see why you got so angry when you found me hiding under that tarp!" cried Becky. "and why you accused me of being a spy."

"Yes. I worry constantly. I see threats everywhere. Even in my dreams."

Becky shivered and glanced over her shoulder. Maybe it was just her imagination, but suddenly the night seemed a little darker.

X

All night, Becky tossed and turned. An enormous eyepatched buccaneer skulked through her dreams, a cutless in one hand, a pistol in the other, and a wicked dagger clenched between his teeth. But morning came at last, the darkness dissolved, and all phantoms fled.

A double-barreled sunrise bathed the islet in its warm green sheen. Flocks of possum-moths soared up from the jungle and shimmered through the sky like Chinese kites. Even the muddy river seemed to sparkle.

Professor Pointer packed the tent and carried it aboard the *Me Too* while Unbefrontable grumbled over a cup of cold coffee and Becky did a dawn joy dance by the ashes of the fire.

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"What yew so happy 'bout, Laffoon? Find some brandy?"

"It's a bee-YOO-tiful day, you old grouch! Besides, aren't you excited? We're working for a famous professor!"

"Perfessor? Some Perfessor. Quick-change artist's more like it."

"You're not still suspicious?"

"Ain't I? Yew tell me."

"I *believe* Professor Pointer. We studied his contributions to archaeology in school."

"Cain't trust nobody what hides bee-hind a phony name."

"You're a fine one to talk! After all, the professor and I don't know *your* name."

" 'Course ya do. Muh name's Unbefrontable."

"I mean your *real* name. Your legal name. The name your parents gave you when you were born."

"Who sez I wuz born? Maybe I got hatched out of an egg,"

"What *is* your name? I've known you all my life, and you've never told me. You've never told anybody."

He chewed on his whiskers, rolled his head back on his neck, then whipped it forward and buried his nose in the coffee cup.

"Look at your ears! They're bright red! You're embarrassed!"

"Now Laffoon . . ."

"Your name embarrasses you, doesn't it! It can't be worse than mine. What is it? Tell me! Tell me tell me tell me!"

"Nope. Yer wastin' yer time."

"You might as well tell me now, *right* now, because if you don't, I'll just keep on pestering you till you do."

"Holy con carne! What'd I do to dee-serve this?"

"TELL ME TELL ME TELL ME!"

"Dang it, Laffoon, yew drive a hard bargain. I give up. I'll tell ya muh so-called real name. But 'fore I tell ya, yew gotta swear ya won't call me by it. And if yew ever *does* call me by it, I'm gonna tie ya up and dangle ya off the back of the boat and let the scissor-fish nibble on yer toes."

"I swear. I promise on a stack of Space Codes. Cross my computer and hope to die. What is it?"

He grimaced and mumbled something incomprehensible under his breath.

"What?"

"Ert foot."

"What?"

"Ert foot."

"Ert? What kind of ert?"

"Egbert,"

"Egbert? That's great! What kind of foot?"

"Plfoot."

"What?"

"Puddlefoot, dang it!"

"Puddlefoot? Egbert Puddlefoot? What's wrong with Egbert Puddlefoot? If you ask me, Egbert Puddlefoot is a good name. In fact. Egbert Puddlefoot's a *super* name. Why are you so embarrassed to be named Eg-

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bert Puddlefoot? If *I* was named Egbert Puddlefoot —"

"Shut up, Laffoon. Don't ever let me hear yew pernouncin' them sillybubbles again."

"Why?"

"Jist don't cotton to it, that's all. Never did cotton to it. I'm warnin' ya, Laffoon. Hearin' that tomfool name is the only dang thing in the whole dang universe what *befronts* me."

He shot her a look that'd freeze a bowl of chili.

"Yew don't wanta *befront* Unbefrontable, do ya, Laffoon?"

XI

For the next three days, they made steady progress. They passed through the lowlands into a region of rolling foothills. The river narrowed and quickened. Rollicking with laughter, the current slapped its stony thighs and tossed up fountains of cinnamon-colored spray.

On the fourth day, they left the jungle behind and churned into a gorge. On either side, corrugated cliffs rose so high that soon only a pale green ribbon of sky remained visible overhead. All morning the *Me Too* battered and brawled her way upstream through the deafening roar of the rapids. Unbefrontable struggled with the wheel while Becky and the professor used a pole to keep the prow from jamming into boulders. When they finally emerged from the ravine and found themselves on a stretch of relatively calm water in a forested mountain valley, Unbefrontable dropped anchor and Becky slumped down on the deck to rest.

Her shoulders ached. Raw, wet blisters covered the palms of her hands. Her whole body felt numb with fatigue.

Professor Pointer was sighting landmarks through the lens of an instrument.

"This is it!" he exclaimed. "We have reached our destination. Somewhere over there" — with a sweep of his hand, he indicated the forest on the far side of the river — "the seedship of the Pandums lies waiting for us to resurrect it."

" 'Fraid that's one ship what's gonna cool its heels fer a spell," announced Unbefrontable from the stern. "Gotta ree-surrect the *Me Too* first. Them dang rapids knocked all these hoses loose."

With the crook of his cane, he hoisted a tangle of loose ends from the engine's innards.

"She's listin' to port, too. Reckon the hull's got more holes in it than an arkapologist's head."

"Unbefrontable!" snapped Becky. "That wasn't very nice."

"I didn't say *which* arkapologist, Laffoon. Did I?"

"Never mind," interjected the professor with a chuckle. "I rather enjoy

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the captain's witticisms. And he is quite correct: we must repair the boat before we can proceed. Unearthing the seedship of the Pandums will be futile if we fail to bring its secrets back to civilization."

Becky stood up and tried to shake the stiffness out of her shoulders. The professor was engrossed in his instruments, so she wandered back to watch Unbefrontable labor over the engine. The old river rat was sweating and cursing and screwing up his face in a variety of wry expressions. He plunged in his arm and pulled out a ruptured coil of tubing, limp and oozy like a piece of intestine.

"Tarnation, Laffoon! I kin fix the rest of it, but what kin I do to patch *this* up? Dang thing ain't worth spit."

He slammed the ruined coil down on the deck and stomped it with the heel of his boot.

"Be careful, Unbefrontable. You shouldn't lose your temper when you're working around that stuff."

Becky's eyes were fixed on the squat fuel tank bolted to the front of the engine. Waves of heat from the overworked metal warped the air around it so that what she saw was not the tank itself but a distorted image of the tank. It throbbed like a mirage in her field of vision, but she knew it was real.

Suddenly she stood in the backyard of her family homestead, stood a few steps away from the fuel tank at the rear of the house, stood there cradling her baby brother in her arms, stood there watching her mother brace a sheet of novaplex shielding against the side of the tank while her father primed the welding torch.

Here and there, then and now: the two scenes merged and parted and merged again, blurring together, the separate tanks becoming one tank — one tank full of death, one explosion of liquid fire, one burning blinding horror . . .

"No!" she screamed. "NO!"

She tumbled through a black vacuum. her head buzzed and spun. Unbefrontable's grizzled countenance whirled in and out of focus at the bottom of a deep well. The circle of light dilated and brightened till she saw his features clearly. Somehow he'd fallen to the deck. He was lying flat on his back, goggling up at her as she knelt over him. He'd hurt himself. She had to help him.

"Yew O.K. Laffoon?"

With a quick flip, gravity turned her upside down. Now she was the one who lay flat on her back. It was Unbefrontable who crouched overhead.

"Yew O.K.?"

"Yes . . . I think so . . ."

"Becky, are you injured?" Profes sor Pointer's face joined Unbefrontable's. "You shouted something and then collapsed. Poor girl — fighting those rapids has exhausted you."

Together they eased her into a sitting position. A pulse of nausea rip-

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pled up from her stomach and danced dizzily through her head. For a moment she felt lighter than air. She floated off the deck. Then she landed again.

"I'm all right now."

"Can you tell us what happened?"

"I think I slipped," she lied. "I was stunned for a minute — but I'm fine now."

"Yew sure?" Unbefrontable eyed her suspiciously. "Yew look fainter than a canary in a decompression lock, Laffoon. Cain't have ya keelin' over every time I turn muh back. Takes muh mind off muh work."

"Don't worry about *me*," whispered Becky. She pushed him away and rose to her feet. "Worry about *them*."

With a trembling finger, she pointed toward the front of the boat.

It was teeming with droopas — mountain droopas, gaunt and barbaric, their antenna knobs daubed with umber and henna pigments, the blue fur of the shoulders plaited with ornaments of bone and shell, their blowpipes bedizened with feathery ruffles. These were savages — a far cry from the plump domesticated droopas who dozed away their lives like overfed zoo monkeys on Misery's riverfront.

Some of them stood nearly three feet in height, and there must have been fifty or sixty of them crowded across the foredeck, straddling the bulwarks and perched on the cargo. They'd crept aboard the *Me Too* without making a sound, and now they scrutinized Becky and her companions in perfect silence.

The professor started to reach for his pocket, but Unbefrontable caught his arm.

"Don't try nothin' with that nefarium ultranosis beam, Perfessor. Them blowpipe darts been dipped in jam, and yew kin take muh word for it —the flavor ain't peach."

XII

The shortest droopa stood in front of the others. He was garbed in finery that made their outfits look drab: anklets of carved wood, a loincloth fashioned from golden possum-moth membranes, a cape to match, and an elaborate array of polished seeds, some strung from his neck, others interwoven through the fur of his waist and thighs.

When the shortest droopa saw Unbefrontable check the professor's arm, his eyestalks zoomed out and his eyeballs bulged. He commenced padding back and forth in front of his troops, gesticulating with his triple-jointed arms, jerking his head up and down like a jack-in-the-box, grunting and chuffing through the olfactory gills on his snout. No sooner had he worked up a lather than he brought the dance to a standstill.

Frozen in mid-stride, poised on

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one leg, he rotated his eyestalks to survey the full circumference of the boat, then stepped forward and hailed the Pointer party with a flourish of his blowpipe.

"Pockload tomtomglug!" he cried. "Orosip tremmelback looboo deem-waffle?"

"Ulnacast tram benlap," answered Unbefrontable. "Sinocrake hamfunk tay gumgrapple. Moop?"

"Sully oar Lubberplum." The shortest droopa tapped himself on the chest. "Lubberlum scot push!"

Unbefrontable dropped to his knees, bent over, and licked the deck with his tongue.

"Lubberplum," he crooned. "Lubberplum Lubberplum papamatta Lubberplum."

Becky's tonsils felt paralyzed, but she managed to squeeze out a hoarse "What are you *doing*?"

"Savin' muh skin. What with all the crud from our boots, these planks taste dang near bad as your coffee, Laffoon, but 'less yew and the perfessor wanta ree-semble a pincushion, better come on down and help me swab 'em."

A split second later, Becky was lapping up splinters. The professor crouched beside her, his whole body shaking with fear.

"Hub mango storpgap bevel pod-ax," declared the shortest droopa. "Mendlump brank. Okapi."

"What's he saying, Unbefrontable? Who is he? What's he going to do to us?"

"Pipe down and keep lickin', Laffoon. It's hard enough to catch the drift of this dang mountain dialect without yew runnin' off at the mouth."

"Bunsap gumbodotten doo!"

Thumping his scrawny chest with a pint-sized fist, the object of their worship tipped one eyestalk back toward the other droopas and flashed them a wink.

Unbefrontable reeled in his tongue.

"Could be His Soo-preme Highness the All Exalted Lubberplum is appeased by now. Then again, could be he ain't. I'm gonna take a chance on it."

Out of the corner of her eye, Becky watched the old riverrat totter to his feet. A few seconds later he jabbed her in the ribs with his cane.

"They ain't turned *me* into a dartboard, so I reckon yew two shiverin' cowards kin git up now, too."

No sooner had Becky stood up than little Lubberplum strode forward half a dozen paces and shook his blowpipe at Unbefrontable.

"Hiss ho frillfribble?"

"Brupe mussop trollvow."

Unbefrontable pointed first at the professor, then at the far side of the river.

"Brupe stubwaffa corvee buck. Brupe drillmallow gaboo."

"Sodapass."

Lubberplum raised his arms in a wide arc and bobbed his eyestalks at Unbefrontable.

Unbefrontable stretched out his

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neck and grinned back, all teeth and Adam's apple.

"What did he say? Come on, Unbefrontable, *tell* us. They're going to put us in a pot and cook us. I just *know* it."

"Button yer lip, Laffoon. These here high-country droopas kin be a purty mean bunch, but canny-bubbles they ain't. Bee-sides, what yew worried fer anyhow? Yer scaly hide's too tough to chew."

"Mandamus wagstrump popple loo debar. Brupe can?"

"Brupe rooncallow. Brupe rooncallow rum."

"Peepdark!"

Lubberplum faced Professor Pointer and bowed deeply from the waist. Then, with a flick of his snout, he put his troops to work. Unsheathing bone knives, they swarmed over the boat and slashed the tarps to shreds. Next all fifty or sixty of them ganged together to hoist one of the crates off the deck and stagger toward the rail with it.

"My equipment!" screeched the professor. "What are they doing with it?"

"Simmer down. What they's doin' is loadin' it into their canoes so's they kin paddle over to the far shore and stash it there fer yer convenience. After that they's gonna ee-scort us up to their village so's we kin shake hands with the witch doctor and pig down some of their choice vittles what they keep fer feast days and suchlike special occasions. What's more, Perfessor, *yew* is the guest of honor. So if I wuz yew, instead of gittin' muh lungbags in an uproar, I'd wrinkle up the corners of muh eyes and give old Lubberplum a nice big smile."

Pinpoints of sweat glistened on his forehead, his complexion showed half as much color as a glass of skim milk, but somehow Malcolm Pointer managed to force his lips into what might have passed for a smile if the *Me Too* had been a morgue.

XIII

By late afternoon they were marching toward the village. Lubberplum led the procession. Behind him a team of sixteen droopas carried Professor Pointer on a wickerwork litter while four others pacing alongside fanned the air with fern fronds to keep the ripper-flies away. Becky and Unbefrontable came next, followed by the rest of the droopas.

"I don't get it," said Becky. "Why are they making all this fuss over the professor?"

"One look at Lubberplum oughta tell ya the answer. What's his most dee-stink feature?"

"Well . . . he's nearly a head shorter than the others. Seems odd that such a little guy should be in charge."

"He's in charge, all right. Old Lub's what ya might call a five-star war chief. They's only one other droopa

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in the whole dang tribe what's got more pull, that's the witch doctor, and I'll betcha diamonds to dogfood *he* turns out to be even punier. Fact is, Laffoon, these here mountain droopas always see-lects a runt to run the show."

"But why?"

"Danged if I know. Could be they figger a feller what's a midget on the outside must be tall timber on the inside. Anyway, kin ya see now why they's all goo-goo-eyed over yer pal the perfessor?"

"Because he's so short?"

"Yew got it, Laffoon, I reckon the only human beans they ever seen before wuz big, rugged he-man adventurers like me. The perfessor's such a shrimpy little squirt, these tomfool droopas got him marked down fer bein' one of our gods or leastwise some kinda high priest."

"Maybe they're right."

"Yer pullin' muh leg."

"Am I? If the professor finds that Pandum seedship, he'll get marked down as someone *very* special in *my* book."

"That, Miss High and Mighty Laffoon, ree-mains to be seen."

Onward they marched through the silky blue darkness of the rain forest. Just before sunset, Becky heard a rhythmic chant coming from somewhere not far away.

"What's that?"

"Lub musta sent a runner ahead with the news. Sounds like the whole dang tribe's tunin' up."

As they trudged up a mossy slope, the chant grew louder and louder. Becky's heart hammered with excitement.

"Can you make out the words? Are they singing about *us?* If the professor's a god, maybe I'm a princess! Come on, Unbefrontable, tell me what they're saying."

"They's sayin' kids oughta have a sack flopped over their head. Specially the dumb ones with nonstop mouths."

"Unbefrontable!"

She tried to punch him in the arm, but he deflected her fist with the crook of his cane and whopped her belly with the shaft.

"Ouch!"

She bent over and wrapped her arms around her waist.

"That wasn't funny at all, you old bully! You hit me *hard!* It really *hurts*!"

Unbefrontable made no reply.

When Becky looked up he was gone and she was engulfed in a sea of turquoise fur.

Hundreds of exultant droopas swarmed around her, yammering and barking, shaking rattles in the air, piping gill flutes, pounding hourglass drums, reaching up to pinch the fabric of her shirt, sweeping her off her feet and passing her overhead as they surged into a wide clearing and charged across it toward a billowing column of oily black smoke.

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Oh no, she thought, they're going to cook us after all! She pictured herself skewered on a long spit over a bed of hot coals, but at the last moment the droopas veered away from the smoke and set her gently down on some sort of pad or mat.

Instantly a bevy of wrinkled grandmothers hemmed her in. Wheezing through their olfactory gills, cackling like crazy, they jostled closer and extended their eyestalks to gawk at her clothes. The up-and-down tempo of the chant reverberated through her head. She drew a deep breath and almost passed out as the combined stench of a thousand bad smells scorched her sinuses. Eyes watering, senses overwhelmed, she pushed away the grannies and struggled to her feet to scan the milling throng for her companions.

With her neck craned she could take in the layout of the whole village. The droopas had arranged it in concentric circles. A network of gardens and compost heaps surrounded a burrow-riddled embankment, the embankment surrounded a cluster of ten or twelve thatch-roofed mud huts, and the huts surrounded an open-air barbecue pit. In the middle of the pit, smothered under a pile of charred meat, a fitful fire belched up a column of black smoke that a moment ago had seemed so ominous.

Part of Becky's mind was calm enough to appreciate the fact that the community had been designed around that barbecue pit. These droopas had the right idea: food was the bull's-eye of their existence, the hub of the wheel — and despite what Unbefrontable had said about war chiefs and witch doctors, she felt certain the *real* boss of the tribe would turn out to be the cook.

But where *was* Unbefrontable? Finally she spotted him sprawled on the porch of a hut about sixty feet away. Steeling her nerves, she waded through droves of dancing droopas till at last she reached him. They had to shout to hear each other over the swelling waves of the chant.

"Where's the professor?"

"Over there." He pointed toward the other side of the barbecue pit. "Looks like they's givin' him the ultra dee-luxe red carpet treatment."

Peering through the smoke, Becky spotted a fancy couch. Under a canopy of tinctured bark sat a very bewildered little man. Droopas pressed close on all sides, loading his lap with gourds and tubers, showering his shirtfront with flower petals, singing his praises to the sky. A comely maiden pulled off his shoes and set to work massaging his feet with what must have been some sort of ointment or cream.

"Poor Professor Pointer!"

Becky couldn't help but laugh. The little archaeologist was doing his utmost to remain aloof, to maintain his dignity, but his left eye kept blinking and his mortuary smile had de-

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cayed into a frantic grimace.

If the professor was the main attraction, she and Unbefrontable were a popular sideshow. As the sky darkened, droopa after droopa laid gifts on the porch where they sat. Before long, Becky was ankle-deep in trinkets and gewgaws. Eventually Lubberplum himself arrived carrying an ornately carved hubble-bubble water pipe with a long hose.

"Gunnyflax slagrash nurk." He offered the hose to Becky. "Keckaroo curd goon. Flook ho."

"What'd he say? He doesn't want me to smoke that thing . . . does he?"

"Yew guessed it, Laffoon. Dinner's dang near ready, and we'll insult the socks off the whole tribe if we don't partake in a puff or two with their number one war chief."

"But . . . but . . ."

"Stop stammerin' and start smokin'. All ya gotta do is swoosh it roundabout yer mouth fer a spell, then blow it out. Jist be dang sure ya don't inhale none of it."

"It's ratfungus, isn't it?"

"Yup. Git them spores into yer lung-bags and yer head'll throb like a broken toe fer the next ten days. Nasty stuff. Be nice if they'd offer us a slug of brandy instead."

Becky pursed her lips around the stem of the hose, caved in her cheeks, waited for a few seconds, then passed it to Unbefrontable. He put on a more convincing show, huffing and chuffing till the bowl of the pipe fumed like a miniature version of the barbecue pit. Tipping back his head, he launched three perfect smoke rings, nodded in approval, then handed the hose back to Lubberplum, who clamped it between his teeth with a chortle of pleasure and strolled away.

"That warn't so bad now, was it?"

"I guess not."

As soon as she spoke, a bitter taste spread through Becky's mouth. Her scalp tingled. Her fingertips buzzed.

That's funny, she thought. Maybe I better have a look at my fingers. But it took her a long time to lift her arm, a very long time, and when a hand finally appeared in front of her eyes. she couldn't remember whose it was or why she wanted to look at it.

That's funny, she thought. What a weird bunch of fingers. They're shining like light bulbs. Somebody must have turned them on.

A steaming platter of soft, black meat materialized out of nowhere, floated past her nose, and performed a three-point landing on her knees. Unbefrontable's voice echoed up from a subterranean cavern far, far away, the words blurring together in a stream of nonsense.

That's funny, she thought. Somebody just put a spoon in my hand. A big wooden spoon. What's it for?

She stared down at the platter of meat. A strange-looking hand was holding it. Must be *my* hand, she decided, my *other* hand — the one that doesn't have a spoon.

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A piquant aroma permeated her nostrils.

Yum. She scooped up a spoonful and tasted it. Yummy yum *yum*. In went the spoon, out came the spoon.

This stuff's the best stuff I ever stuffed myself with! She shoveled it in and wolfed it down, but to her amazement, the faster she ate, the more slowly she ate. Every bite seemed to last forever. No matter how quickly she swallowed, her supersentitive taste buds savored in slow motion each separate particle of flavor. And talk about flavor — every morsel tasted more delicious than the one before.

Finally nothing remained but a few scraps in a gooey bed of gravy. She raised the platter to lick it clean.

That's funny, she thought. This piece looks like a beak. And what's this? If I didn't know better, I'd swear it was . . . no, it couldn't be . . .

AN EYEBALL!

"Unbefrontable!" she wailed. "Unbefrontable — I think I'm going to be sick . . ."

Becky's meal set all kinds of speed records on the return trip. She refilled the platter and slid it out of sight under the porch. The next thing she knew, Unbefrontable was yanking her to her feet.

"Come on, Laffoon. Yew cain't sit here crammin' yer gut with scrumptious country-style home cookin' all night long. It jist won't do. Yer a guest here, and ya gotta act perlite and mind your manners and take care of yer social obligations. Right now Lub wants to interduce us to the witch doctor."

As he towed her into the crowd, bright colors and raucous cries bounced through Becky's brain. All around her a sea of furry blue faces pulsed and shimmered in the firelight. Everything was unreal, everything distorted, everything magnified or shrunk or bent out of shape. She couldn't tell whether she was actually weeping and laughing or just wanted to. She kept blacking out and waking up again, losing segments of perception, jerking through the darkness in time-lapse frames till abruptly she found herself crawling after Unbefrontable through a droopa-sized doorway into the darker darkness of a hut.

The inside of that hut made the rest of the village smell like a soap factory. Even Unbefrontable, whose own scent was not exactly delicate, wrinkled up his nose and wiped his eyes.

"Whew. The air in here's thick enough to butter yer toast."

But Becky hardly noticed. She was staring at a figure in the corner, a dimly lit figure hunched over an oil lamp, an ancient, wizened, billion-wrinkled figure — the tiniest, oldest droopa she'd ever seen. He was even smaller than Lubberplum.

And he was deformed. A withered limb dangled from the center of his chest.

"Old Three Arms!"

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XIV

When the bray of voices broke into his vision trance, Dodogax groaned and muttered an ancient droopa curse. Why couldn't they leave him alone?

Nowadays he didn't have many vision trances, and this had been a lively one. In it he was young again, only 212 and still full of pep. His fourteenth wife had just died of exhaustion, and he was courting winsome Haruharu, an empty-headed female if ever there was one — but so alluring with those slender antennae and that supple little snout.

Haruharu played hard to get, spurning all his advances. Finally he cut off a dewclaw from his third arm and offered it to her as a love token. She strung the dewclaw on a cord and hung it around her neck. Then, with a wanton smile, she lay down on the moss and showed him her egg pouch.

But when he bent to embrace her, she burst into flames. Even in those days, Dodogax was nobody's fool. Quick as a ripper-fly, he darted away. Burning furiously, Haruharu pursued him. He flew through the forest with exceptional cunning, but the wind fanned her into a vast, onrushing conflagration. All around him, ferns exploded into crackling sheets of fire. He dodged this way and that, looking for an escape, but Haruharu had him trapped.

Soon tongues of flame were singeing the fur of his thighs. His only chance was to fight fire with fire. He sliced off another dewclaw and popped it into his mouth. Instantly his snout ignited like a blowtorch, and a blinding white incandescence filled the air. Her fire struggled to overcome his, but his was hotter and more virtuous. After the battle he inhaled the last few flames and stored them away in the back of his throat.

Haruharu knelt at his feet. Trembling with fear, she lifted her eyestalks and implored him to kill her quickly without any torture. He took the cord from her neck, ripped off the dewclaw, and with his third arm hurled it into the sky so the stars could feed on its fire. Then he tied the cord around Haruharu's snout as a sign of shame and led her back to his hut.

In this way, Dodogax had taken his fifteenth wife. She'd been a good one, too, humble and subservient— a hard worker who knew when to keep her mouth shut.

Too bad these rude intruders weren't as well trained. Their blaring voices had interrupted him during his wedding night with Haruharu, just when the vision trance was getting interesting. Sigh . . . .

Extending one eyestalk, he dilated the nictitating membrane just enough to see who it was that dared to invade his privacy. Huddled together on the far side of the hut sat three figures — Lubberplum and two

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furless giants. A third furless giant was crawling in through the doorway.

Furless giants! Dodogax zoomed out his other eyestalk and rolled both eyeballs. This was a genuine treat.

Forty years ago the gods had sent down a tribe of furless giants for the entertainment of the lowland droopas. They'd proved to be wonderfully amusing — big, goofy creatures who wasted all their time trying to change things around. For forty years, Dodogax had squirmed with jealousy. The mountain droopas were the noblest droopas of all. Why hadn't *they* been given a batch of furless giants?

Occasionally a few of the big oafs would journey up the river. Dodogax had taken advantage of these visits to master their language, but they always hurried back to the lowlands. It had been ages since he'd seen the last one, and now three of them were crouching under his roof.

"Fish lozenge hamsled." He gave Lubberplum a stern look. "Gordox magee parbuckle shirk. Zimlet!"

With a pitiful whimper the war chief flung himself down and groveled on the filthy floor. Then he beat a hasty retreat through the low arch of the doorway.

"Is telling junior for scram. Greetings and hello there by gosh. Me Dodogax lord high shaman over all of it the mountain droopas. You calling me Old Three Arms. Cool cat. Plenty hip. Is speaking your jive like it the pro."

He paused to stretch his eyestalks toward each of them in turn.

"Hiya kids. Welcome to it my hangout. You calling it Toadbreath Hill. Plenty fine place. Old Three Arms's chow you makum your chow. Old Three Arms's bed you makum your bed. Hoo boy! Now we talk. Is wondering how you coming for. You got names, James?"

"Unbefrontable's muh handle, Yer Honor. Don't spoze yew ree-member the occasion, but we's crossed paths before, yew and me, thirty years back when I wuz a young buck 'stead of a seasoned veteran."

Old Three Arms smiled and nodded but made no reply. With their sawed-off snouts and stationary eyes, the furless giants all looked alike. He couldn't tell them apart in a lineup, much less recognize one after three decades had rolled by.

"Anyway, this here's Becky Laffoon, she'a a sweet little orphan girl, and that there's the famous Perfessor Pointer, and the three of us wanta commence these perceedin's by thankin' ya kindly fer yer horsepitality — all the singin' and dancin' and finger-lickin' vittles and what not."

"We are being *mountain* droopas. Not like lowland droopas. Lowland droopas are having all of them the underpolite manners. They are being the scumbag riffraff and hoi polloi. Plenty selfish. Plenty lazy. Phooey on them! But the mountain droopas we are having the top-

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drawer manners. We are knowing how for entertain our furless friends in style. Ol-la-la. To you guys we are throwing one wild and crazy party. To you guys we are — how you say it? —*really getting down. You dig it* boogie all night?"

"Yew bet, Yer Honor. Nothin' like it. More fun than a barrel fulla baby possum-moths. But we ain't come to town jist to kick up our heels. Fact is, we'd like to ask yew a favor or two."

Old Three Arms perked up. Maybe they needed something only he could provide.

"Shoot, Big Daddy. Is all ears."

"Well sir, to start off with, I been frettin' 'bout the *Me Too*. She's muh riverboat what I built from scratch with muh own two hands. After buckin' them rapids, she's got more holes in her bottom than a chicken-wire bathtub. Engine trouble, too. First thing tomorrow mornin', somebody's gotta hike back down to the river and patch her up. Reckon I kin do it all by muhself, but I'd sure be grateful if yew wuz to send a platoon of yer boys along to lend me a hand."

"No sweat, Chet. Is sending hand-picked repair crew. Hard workers. Strong backs. Plenty smart. Follow orders like it the Japanese volleyball team. Fix boat in jiffy."

Old Three Arms chuckled. The repair crew would follow orders, all right. *His* orders. They'd fix the boat, too. Fix it *good.*

"That's dang nice of ya, Yer Honor. Much obliged. Now then, the perfessor here got a ree-quest, too. He's an arkapologist — that's a witch doctor what digs holes in the ground— and he's been hankerin' to dig a few in this neck of the woods. Means more work fer yer boys cuz he's got a ton of junk to haul around. Spoze that could be arranged?"

"Is arranged him right away. Is pickled tink for outhelp fellow witch doctor. Old Three Arms dig it the holes."

"No no no," said the professor. "You don't understand. I will do all the digging myself. What I need are porters to carry my equipment."

Old Three Arms cackled with glee.

"No no no yourself. You not understand *me.* Is making play on the words. How you call it? — the pun. Old Three Arms *dig* it the holes. Is joke. Get it?"

"That's a good one, Yer Honor. Yew got a ree-markably ree-fined funny bone. Yer mighty generous, too. When the perfessor writes up the story of this here expedition, I guarantee he's gonna designate yew as a bone fide philanthropical benefactor of scientifical progress. Yes sir. Now then, they's one more problem — nothin' special, ya understand, but it might be tricky if yew warn't so magical and such. Take a quick peek at Laffoon's kisser. See that crusty greenish purple buildup on her skin? See how it's sorta ropy and gnarled on her forehead and sorta scooped out

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like a crater on her cheek? See that hunk what's hangin' off her chin like a turkey wattle? Well sir, them doo-dads ain't normal features on the human face. They's goliath-sap scars is what they is. Becky don't care much fer them scars. Fact is, she wuz hopin' yew might shift that supernatural arm into high gear and make her look like she used to.."

"Is piece of cake, Jake."

"Sure," said Becky. "Sure it's a piece of cake. The best surgeons in the Galaxy don't have a clue, but all *you* have to do is say abracadabra and these beauty marks of mine will vanish into thin air. *Sure.*"

"Me top-banana shaman. Got plenty slick tricks up sleeve. Third arm's the charm. Is fixing you up pronto, Tonto."

"I bet."

"You dig it we start tomorrow?"

"O.K. I don't suppose it'll do any harm to let you try. There's no way you can make me look any worse than I already do. But don't plan on using a knife or a razor or anything like that. When a sap scar gets carved off, it just grows back. Besides, I'm allergic to pain. Whatever it is you think you can do for me, you'll have to do it with magic and *nothing* else. *Just* magic."

"Magic all me need. Magic do it all, Paul."

Old Three Arms grinned. He had two of these furless giants in his hip pocket, and all he needed was a little more time to soften up number three. If he could keep them around long enough, anything was possible. Their friends and relatives might even follow them upstream. What a triumph that would be! The lowland droopas could scratch their heads and wonder what went wrong while the mountain droopas had some fun for a change.

But he had to play his cards right. It wasn't a cinch. The whole deal might fall through if they found out his third arm had lost its touch years ago.

XV

Next morning, Becky woke up with a queasy stomach and a maddening headache. Her skin itched and her muscles shivered. So this is what a ratfungus hangover feels like, she thought. The next time Lubberplum offers me that pipe, I'm gonna jam it up his snout.

Old Three Arms had insisted each of them sleep in a private hut. When Becky crawled out of hers, she saw that Unbefrontable and the professor were already up and about, busy assembling their work crews. Blinking and yawning, she wandered out of the village and across the clearing till she came to a brook. The water was icy cold with fresh snowmelt from the peaks. She drank and splashed

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and bathed, then trudged back to confront Unbefrontable.

"I feel rotten."

"Yew look worse."

"Thanks. What's up?"

"Yew tell me."

"You're going down to the river to fix up the *Me Too,* right?"

"Kee-rect."

"What about the professor?"

"Sez he wants the tent and supplies and all them crates lugged back up here to the village. Accordin' to his calculations, that seedship ain't but a quarter mile from where we's standin' right now, so's this is the place to set up base camp."

"Makes sense. What about me? I'll be glad to help either one of you."

"Don't yew ree-member a dang thing? Today's yer big day, Laffoon. Yew gotta stay here so's Old Three Arms kin cast a beautification spell over that butcher-shop mug of yers. He's in there waitin' fer ya right now."

"I've changed my mind. I don't want to spend the whole day in a stinky hut. That witch doctor gives me the creeps. He's a complete fake, and you know it. Come on, Unbefrontable, let me go with you."

"Nope. Could be Old Three Arms *is* a fake, but it don't matter cuz we cain't afford to insult him. Yew promised him and yer goin' through with it, Laffoon. Better git yerself into the right frame of mind, too. Magic don't work if ya don't believe in it."

"How childish do you think I am? Only little kids believe in magic!"

"Ain't nothin' wrong with little kids. They's lively on their feet, and dang sensible, too. That's why I been one all muh life. Now git yer butt over there and give Old Three Arms a chance."

"All right already. I'll do it. I'll do it to be polite. I'll do it because I don't want to mess up Professor Pointer's good relations with the droopas. Don't you think for a minute I'm doing it because I'm stupid enough to believe it might work. Maybe you're a little kid, Unbefrontable—but *I'm* not."

Sticking what used to be her nose into the air, she gave him a haughty toss of her shoulders and stalked off to meet her fate.

The interior of the hut was just as dark and smelly as the night before. Old Three Arms sat in the same spot, hunched over the glimmering wick of his oil lamp. When Becky crawled in, he craned one eyestalk and scrutinized her.

"You mad, Dad?"

"Huh? No . . . no, I'm not mad. It's just that . . ."

"Me know. You thinking Old Three Arms loudmouth humbug quack. No can change it your face. Waste your time."

"No! I mean . . . well . . ."

"Is no point you telling it the lie about your feelings, okeydokey? Me understand. Me no dummy."

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With both ordinary hands, he pawed through the heap of oddments at his feet till he found a cluster of dried flowers. Carefully then he transferred some of them to his third hand. The extra arm hung limp and lifeless, but its crooked fingers slowly curled up and closed around the brittle blossoms, crunching them into a fine powder. Becky caught a whiff of pungent fragrance — some sort of pollen, she guessed — but a moment later it was lost in the general reek of the hut.

"Is putting it the old zip back into third arm," he explained. "Now me tell you magic story. Ancient droopa legend. Words inside arm but come it out the mouth. Plenty strong stuff. Plenty holy. Dynamite cure. Make it all your scars run for cover."

He paused to let some of the flower dust trickle through his fingers into the dancing flame of the lamp.

"Maybe not work today," he added. "Magic need it for firm up. Is starting right away but not expecting it the results till after the little while. You savvy?"

Becky nodded. Oh yes, she thought. I savvy, all right. You're not the first con man who's tried to sell me a bucket of baloney. I know all about stalling tactics. I've heard the same line a million times from Dr. Belvedere.

Somehow, though, she didn't really mind. Her anger had drained away. The headache was gone and her stomach felt fine. She watched the lamp wick burn with a soft, pleasant glow, and suddenly the inside of the hut seemed comfortable and cozy. A sense of peace rose around her like a warm bath. With a sigh she let herself relax and bask in the low, sonorous music of Old Three Arms's voice.

"Story is happening — how you say it? — once beyond the time in the golden oldies long long ago, Joe . . ."

XVI

Is all about Teegnomen and Kikobad. Teegnomen him half droopa half god superstar shaman. Me pretty good shaman myself but not in the same league with old Teegnomen. Kikobad her Teegnomen's fat little daughter.

"One day Teegnomen him plenty thirsty. Is telling Kikobad her better make it the tracks to fetch him tall frosty gourd of springwater double-time quick or else.

'Kikobad no move it the inch. Got plenty too much pride. Ten to one her be playing with a short deck too.

'Nuts to you, Papa-san. Buzz off. You want it the cold one, you fetchum yourself.'

"Teegnomen him fly off it the handle. Foam at the snout. Roll it the eyeballs. Scream and shout. Finally is calming down long enough to ask it maybe Kikobad her wantum the knuckle sandwich.

"Kokobad her no budge. Her sitting tight. Her one stubborn chick.

"Teegnomen him too dry for wait

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any longer so is tossing in the towel. Is hiking over to spring and get it his drink himself. Water plenty good. Wet it the whistle but no cool it the temper. Him still hot over collar. Do slow burn.

"Now maybe you not knowing this but Teegnomen him already turn it all of them his brothers and sisters onto stones, eight wives onto slime-crabs, twenty-two sons onto ripper-flies, and nineteen daughters onto gasworms. Kikobad only one left. Him plenty ticked off. Him make it up his mind her deserve for get it changed onto something worst over all."

Becky yawned. Old Three Arms's story didn't seem very interesting. She hadn't slept well last night, and now she felt so toasty warm and relaxed it was hard to keep her eyes open.

"First Teegnomen him decide it for turn Kikobad onto big stinky pile of bladder-bat dung. Then him cook up nastier fate. Is hiding in ferns beside it spring and settling down for wait for her for wonder how him no come back.

"Is long wait, Kate. Day turn onto night. Stars come out for watch it Teegnomen's revenge. Finally Teegnomen him hear it footsteps. Is Kikobad all right. Her plenty worried.

" 'Daddy? Where you at, Daddy? You O.K., Daddy? I love you, Daddy! Forgive me, Daddy!'

"Teegnomen him no make it a sound. Pretty soon Kikobad her waddle close enough. Teegnomen him pounce out from behind it the ferns. Is snagging her by it the snout. Is pulling her near it the spring. Is pushing her underbelow it the water.

"Hoo boy! What a scrap! Kikobad her fight back plenty hard. Is kicking and clawing like it the crazy. Teegnomen him just laugh and shove it her deeper down.

" 'You no fetchum me the water, little fatty, now you drinkum double dose yourself.'

"Him no kidding. Him hold it Kikobad underbelow all night long. But believe it or not, her no drown. You gasterflabbed? Him got plenty hoodoo voodoo mumbo jumbo for keep her alive. Is no want it killum her, just soak it off her face, that's all.

"After the while her snout it softly up and fallum off and drift away.

"Next her lose it her ears.

"All night long her lose it different parts from her face.

"Cracks it the dawn and Teegnomen him drag her out and show it Kikobad her reflection. Droopa face all gone. Her look it like old dead fish now. Plenty ugly. No catch husband.

"Kikobad her plenty bummed off. Rather be stone, gasworm, anything else but fishface. Is sobbing and moaning and wailing for him for have it the mercy for finish her off. Her no want it for live long life looking — how you say it? — looking like it the *troutlips*. Her scared all of it the other droopas them snicker and point

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and callum her bad names and hawk it the goobers on her and make it her go away. Ha! Hoo boy! That show how much *her* know.

"What really happen is being just the opposite. Them other droopas feel *sorry* for her. Them pity her. Them be so plenty too much sweet and nice it make Kikobad barf.

"Then something awesome happen. All of it her ripper-fly brothers decide for help her out. Is flying up and buzzing in it her earhole. Is giving her the hot tip. Kikobad her wise up fast.

"You listen down good now. This part of story plenty much important. Is magic part. Is chasing your scars away, Ray."

But Becky was just too drowsy to listen. She realized Kikobad's predicament resembled her own, but 95 percent of her mind was already sound asleep. Her eyes closed, Old Three Arms's voice drifted away, and like a miracle the warm colors of home materialized around her.

She was nestled deep in her favorite hydrobag, reclining with her chin in one hand, watching her mother nurse the baby. Her mother sat on the other side of the room, cradling the baby in both arms, singing him a lullaby, pressing him close to her bosom with her head tipped and her long, fawn-colored hair falling in a soft cascade.

Suddenly the scene rippled and shifted. Becky's mother vanished. Now Becky herself sat with the baby in her arms. The baby looked like Professor Pointer. He gazed up at her from his solemn, young-old eyes and smiled. A transparent bubble of spit formed in the corner of his mouth. He cooed and burbled. Then he arched his back and threw up his milk. It splashed back over his face, covering his features, darkening and hardening into a gluey, gnarled mass of greenish purple scars.

Dismayed, Becky bent close and lavished the scars with frantic kisses. One by one they disappeared. Soon nothing remained — nothing at all. The baby was gone. He'd become a zero, a void, an empty nest in her aching heart.

"Daddy?" she cried. "Where are you, Daddy?"

Daddy didn't answer. Daddy had vanished, too — just like Mommy and her baby brother and the other baby that looked like Malcolm Pointer. All of them were gone, gone forever, and Becky sat alone in the vacuum of her fear, faceless and blank, a stranger to herself.

XVII

When Becky awoke, dull waves of pain throbbed through her head. Her skin felt feverish, her stomach felt heavy and sour, weighed down by something she couldn't digest.

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She looked at Old Three Arms. He must have finished his story while she was dreaming. He still sat in the same spot, but he was snoozing now, snoring through his gill slits, nodding forward over the lamp. The flame flickered fitfully, producing more smoke than light. When she took a deep breath, the acrid fumes tickled a nerve in her solar plexus. A moment later she started to hiccup.

The hiccups hurt. She tried stretching full length, but that didn't help, so she turned and crawled out of the cramped little hut. The light dazzled her eyes. It was that time in late afternoon when the depths of the Misarean sky shone glassy green like the underside of a wave. She'd dreamt most of the day away.

Each hiccup startled her, but then she forgot it immediately. Her mind was vacant, her vision blurry. Her ears buzzed with a faint continuous resonance like the whirr of insect wings. She stood in a stupor, groggy with sleep, surveying the village in between hiccups.

Some of the droopas were going through the motions of work, listlessly spading their gardens. Others idled around the barbecue pit, dozing, staring into space, perfecting the art of boredom. Last night they'd waited in line to touch her clothes and offer her trinkets. Now they seemed unaware of her presence.

Rubbing the nape of her neck, she meandered from one hut to the next. Untended infants wallowed in the dust, their fur hopping with vermin. A cripple squatted on a heap of garbage, yelping weirdly and picking at an open sore on his knee. Five or six grannies crouched around a carcass, skinning it with bone knives. Everywhere she looked, Becky saw filth and wretchedness.

What a dump, she thought. What an awful place. How can that old fraud of a witch doctor claim he'll heal my scars, when his own people are suffering like this?

She answered herself with another hiccup, then wandered on. She felt hideously depressed, trapped in a desolate world. Her existence lacked purpose. The future held only bitterness and pain.

Presently she encountered Unbefrontable. He lay sprawled out in the shade of a porch, legs askew, head hanging, a fat, peach-colored gourd nestled in the crook of one arm.

"Unbefrontable! What's the matter? Are you — hic! — all right?"

"Never better, Laffoon. Never better."

Lifting his head, he inspected her with a bleary, cross-eyed squint, then took a long drink from the gourd.

"Why aren't you down at the river repairing the *Me Too?* You haven't— hic! — fixed her already, have you?"

"Got muh subordinates workin' on it. They's good boys they is. No point in *me* hangin' around. Might git in their way . . ."

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"Unbefrontable! Those stupid droopas don't know how to do anything! Unless you're there to — hic! —supervise them, they'll wreck the whole boat!"

"Now Laffoon—"

"Don't 'now Laffoon' me! What's in that — hic! — gourd anyway?"

He held up the vessel and gave it a feeble shake.

"This here's a pure and medicinal native potation — a little somethin' what the boys gave me to quench muh thirst, lubricate muh joints, and ree-charge muh batteries."

"It's booze! You're — hic!— drunk!"

"I'm sprized at yew, Laffoon — accusin' a wily old riverboat captain of inslopification. Yer the one what's got the hiccups, not me."

He started to chuckle, then belched loudly. The belch took him by surprise, and a dribble of slobber soaked into his beard before he could wipe it away.

"That's disgusting, Unbefrontable. Everything about you is — hic! — disgusting. Your socks stink, your armpits stink, your breath stinks, and you've got warts all over the end of your — hic! — nose. You're even worse than that goofball nerd of a witch doctor. I'll — hic! — tell you something else, too."

She trembled with anger.

"You're not my friend anymore. You're nobody's friend, not even your own. You're just a worthless, disgusting, pitiful, no-good — hic! — alcoholic!"

The old riverrat mumbled something unintelligible, took another long swig from the gourd, lay back on the porch, and closed his eyes.

Fists clenched, Becky stood there glaring at him, struggling to control her rage. She wanted to kick him, to shatter that idiotic gourd over his idiotic head, to jump up and down on his face till it looked like hers. Stifling an anguished cry, she spun around and stomped away.

On the far side of the clearing, close to the brook where she'd bathed that morning, half hidden among the ferns, she spied a triangle of mustard-yellow fabric — the bush tent.

Professor Pointer, she thought. He's the only one I can rely on. I'll go have a talk with him.

But when she entered the tent, it was empty except for a campstool, the professor's sleeping bag, and a few odds and ends. She glanced around for a clue, then snapped her fingers.

The professor must be in the forest. I bet he's found the place where that Pandum seedship is buried. He's probably unpacked his equipment and started digging already.

Bursting with excitement, she turned to rush out of the tent. As she bent to duck under the flap, the heel of her boot caught the edge of a small, flat box and sent it tumbling. The lid fell open, and a sheaf of papers spilled out. Quickly she knelt to

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reassamble them and put them back. She was closing the lid when a letterhead on the top sheet caught her eye.

That's funny, she thought.

Bending closer, she read what was typed under the letterhead. The very first sentence cured her hiccups.

XVIII

Ten minutes later, Becky darted out of the tent and raced across the clearing to the hut where she'd left Unbefrontable. He lay curled on his side in the shade of the porch with his knees tucked under his chin and his arms wrapped around the empty gourd in a loving embrace.

"Wake up!" she yelled, flapping the papers in his face. "Wake up, Unbefrontable! This is important! This is *really* important!"

But Unbefrontable didn't wake up. He couldn't. He'd blacked out. He was lost in the deep and dreamless death-sleep of total inebriation.

"Come on, Unbefrontable! You just *have* to wake up!"

She grabbed his shoulders and shook him till her arms ached. She pried open his eyelids. She slapped his cheeks. She kicked his butt. But Unbefrontable didn't even twitch. He lay there in oblivion.

"Please, Unbefrontable! You have to wake up before . . . before . . ."

With a shudder, Becky glanced back at the bush tent. It looked deserted still, but soon . . .

"This is urgent, Unbefrontable! I need your *help!* What do I have to do to make you wake up?"

Tears of frustration stung her eyes. Angrily she rubbed them dry and tried to concentrate.

"There must be a solution. Think, Becky, think."

Suddenly a wicked smile twisted her lips. She learned over till her mouth hovered only an inch above Unbefrontable's ear.

"EGBERT!" she bellowed. "EGBERT PUDDLEFOOT!"

He sat bolt upright. His mouth fell open, and his bloodshot eyes bulged like a frog's.

"Ma? That yew, Ma?"

"No, dum-dum, it's me."

His eyes narrowed to focus on Becky. He stared with blank incomprehension, then seized his cane and took a wild swipe at her head.

"Tarnation, Laffoon! Yer peskier than a razor-ant in a pair of — hic! — long johns! A feller cain't even take a nap with yew — hic! — around! What yew wake me up for anyhow — jist to ree-mind me I'm a deespicable old — hic! — boozehound?"

"I'm sorry I said what I said, Unbefrontable, even though it's all true. But that doesn't matter now. Look what I found in the tent!"

She thrust the sheaf of papers under his nose.

"Read this! It's *important!*"

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"Hmph."

He snatched the papers out of her hand and gave them a ferocious scowl. After a minute he whistled.

"Holy con carne, Laffoon! We been bamboozled, flimflammed, and — hic! — hornswoggled, too!"

"You can say that again. We need to do something fast. But what?"

"Follow me."

When he tried to stand, his legs buckled and he sagged against the mud wall of the hut.

"Are you all right?"

"Course I ain't. I'm smashed. I'm plowed. I'm drunker than a dog with a gut fulla — hic! — rotten peaches. But that don't mean I cain't do what's gotta be done."

Staggering away from the wall, he veered across the clearing toward the tent. Becky supported his elbow and tried to guide him in a straight line, but they made more progess sideways than forward. When they scaled the burrow-riddled embankment, he fell hard on his hip. Finally they reached the brook. He sank to his knees and submerged his head in the frigid current. Half a minute later he rose to his feet, his eyebrows and whiskers dripping like seaweed.

"That there ice water hog-tied muh hiccups and clarified muh noggin," he announced. "I kin handle anythin' now."

Setting his chin at a grim angle, he lurched through the ferns and lunged into the tent. A moment later he emerged with a rectangular black case in his arms.

"First things first," he explained. "We gotta cut off that lyin' lizard's contact with Terra. This here's a transgalactic organic telecommunications console. It's a tad more sophisticated than your run-of-the-mill telepulser."

He hoisted the case overhead and hurled it down on a rock. It cracked in half with a sharp crunch. He finished it off with his cane.

"Kee-rection, Laffoon. This here *wuz* a transgalactic organic telecommunications console. Now it's a hunk of junk."

"What next?"

"Next we gotta corner that critter and take him into custody."

"How? He's armed. He has that nefarium ultranosis beam he killed the gorilla roach with. Remember?"

"I'm armed, too, Laffoon."

Unbefrontable pulled out his sonic pistol and cocked it with a flourish.

"The trick's to git the drop on him 'fore he knows we're wise to him. Come on now. We cain't afford to waste time exercisin' our jaw muscles. We gotta befront that varmint whilst they's still enough daylight to see by."

With her heart in her throat, Becky followed Unbefrontable into the forest. The twin suns had already set, and the tremulous green twilight was rapidly ebbing.

That sonic pistol isn't much of a

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weapon, she thought. Besides, Unbefrontable's still drunk. We don't have a chance. We'll both be dead in a few minutes. She remembered the strange pink ray of the nefarium ultranosis beam and how it had deflated the gorilla roach's body with a sizzling hiss.

What a sickening way to die! I'm no coward, but I'd hate to die like that.

She was on the verge of slinking back to the village, when Unbefrontable turned around and put his finger to his lips.

"Don't make a sound," he whispered. "He's jist on the far side of that thicket."

Together they crept forward through a hodgepodge of undergrowth, then squirmed beneath the thorny fronds of a jupiter fern into a clump of reeds. Parting the stalks, Unbefrontable revealed a narrow glade directly below.

Empty crates lay scattered around the perimeter of the glade. In the center stood an assembled mechanism — some sort of engine or pump wrapped in a silver spaghetti of pipes and suspended from a massive tripod. Its flywheels and pistons vibrated with power as a central drill bored deeper and deeper into the ground.

Beside the drill stood a diminutive figure wearing radiation armor, thick airfoam boots, a respiration tank, and a transparent, bubble-shaped helmet. In his oversized gloves he clumsily held a metal bucket. Something inside the bucket was emitting pulses of eerie pink radiance.

"Looks like our pint-sized pal hit paydirt," whispered Unbefrontable. "Dang it."

"Is a sonic pistol any good against that kind of armor?"

"Don't know. Reckon he don't know either. Let's hope we don't hafta find out."

Unbefrontable stood up and limped down the slope into the glade. Becky's heart was hammering so fast she feared she might faint, but somehow she followed him. He held the pistol in both hands with its barrel aimed straight at the little man's helmet.

"What is the meaning of this?"

The helmet's vent muffled the voice, but there was no mistaking that cold, arrogant, official tone. Becky's fear exploded into anger.

"We know who you *really* are!" she cried. "You're not the real Professor Pointer, and you're not an archaeologist either. Your name is van Downey, after all, and you're a geologist from a giant corporation called Megalode Minerals."

Stepping slowly in his cumbersome suit, van Downey turned toward Becky. She couldn't see his face. His helmet reflected the pulsating radiance like a mirror flashing in the sun.

"You're not here to save people from famine, Mr. van Downey. You're not here to discover the ancient Pan-

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dum secret of food production. You're not here to dig up a seedship. You're here to . . . to . . . to dig up *death!*"

"That's a rather melodramatic way of phrasing it, Miss Laffoon."

"Is it? *Is* it, Mr. van Downey?"

"If you will just calm down, I can explain everything."

"Yew don't hafta eggs-plain a consarn thing," said Unbefrontable, his pistol leveled on the shining helmet. "All yew hafta do is keep yer slimy paws up where I kin see 'em. One false move and I'll blow ya inside out."

"You both seem terribly overwrought. I can't blame you. You have been deceived. But there was a good reason for it. I had to be careful. If you will just listen—"

"We don't want to listen to another story!" snapped Becky. "We're sick of your stories. We know the truth, Mr. van Downey. Would you like me to spell it out for you?"

"By all means."

"A while back, Megalode Minerals ran a routine geomorphic analysis of Misare XII. According to the computer, there probably are high concentrations of nefarium ore in the mountains — right here where we're standing now. I may be a stupid little girl, Mr. van Downey, but I know what nefarium is. I know it's the power source for that weapon of yours. I know it's the most radioactive element in the universe. I know it's illegal to mine it, illegal to sell it, illegal to use it. But laws don't always work when money's involved, do they, Mr. van Downey?

"Raw nefarium's worth its weight in diamonds on the black market, so the big shots at Megalode are drooling. All they have to do is sneak in a geologist to confirm the computer's prediction. That's you, Mr. van Downey. If you locate a bed of high-quality ore, your bosses will set up a concealed mining operation, establish a safe contact with the black market, then sit back and rake in the profits.

"Oh yes — one more thing. There'll be a few 'minor' side effects. The radioactivity that's released by the mining operations will kill everything for miles around — including the droopas. It'll poison the river so badly, the people downstream in Misery won't have any drinking water. But why should that bother the big shots at Megalode?"

As her voice shrilled into a wail, Becky dashed forward and brandished her fists in the air.

"What do they care? They're just like the big shots at Sapco! They'll be making lots of *money!*"

"Look out, Laffoon!" yelled Unbefrontable. "Yer blockin' muh line of fire!"

With a snap of his wrists, van Downey pitched the bucket toward them. Becky ducked but not in time. A blinding pink brilliance struck her full in the face. For a moment she

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stood there swaying, eyes squeezed shut, wondering what had hit her. A profound numbness enveloped her senses. Far away she heard the commotion of shouts, the scuffle of boots, the chicka chicka WHOMP of a sonic pistol.

Then all was silence. Her head spun with vertigo. Her knees melted and she plunged into a vortex of light.

XIX

A roar in her ears: the roar of a burning house.

A weight on her chest: the weight of sheet metal.

Agony: agony trickling over her face; mute agony; unscreamed agony; an endless Chinese water torture of liquid fire drip drip dripping on her forehead, slicing through her skin, boiling into her flesh like molten lead.

Then voices: angry, frightened voices:

"It's caught on a snag!"

"Get it uncaught! This place is going up like a tinderbox!"

"All right, all right! I'm coming as fast as — oh no!"

"What's the matter now?"

"Ohhhhh . . ."

"Snap out of it, man!"

"But . . . but . . ."

"Those two have had it, Gilbert! They're fried. There's nothing you can do for 'em. If you look at what's left of 'em, you'll just get sick. The closer you look, the sicker you'll get. So don't look."

"Ohhhhh . . ."

"Ivan! Get over here and take Gilbert's hose! He's tossing his cookies!"

"Coming, Vic!"

"Move it, man!"

"Wait a sec! Here's another body!"

"You're kidding me! Where?"

"Right here! Under the wreckage! Looks like a kid!"

"Dead?"

"Can't tell. Wait till I pull off this damn siding."

Grunts of exertion.

The weight lifting.

The agony seething.

"It's a girl! She's got a baby in her arms!"

"Dead?"

"The baby's crushed, but the girl's still breathing. Looks bad, though. Her head's trapped under a piece of the tank. She's got sap all over her face."

"Haul her out of there and scrape it off. Call the infirmary for a hovermed. And Ivan — don't let Gilbert see her. He's sick enough as it is."

Light dazzling her eyes.

Arms lifting her body.

Agony agony agony: the agony forever; the timeless fire; the flesh of her face bubbling like lava.

Agony then and agony now. Agony in her own backyard; agony in the

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rain forest. The agony of goliath sap; the agony of nefarium ore.

The two agonies writhed together in a murderous embrace. They mated to the death. Perishing, they gave birth to a third agony — an agony called hate. Inside Becky Laffoon that new agony began to grow like an uncontrollable cancer.

Up she rose in a fountain of hate. Hate gushed from her heart. Hate brawled through her veins. Hate flooded her cells till every cell ruptured and burst.

Up she rose like a mad scientist's last experiment. Hate bloated her body, swelling with its own demonic life, splitting her open like the husk of a seed.

Up she rose, enlarging, gaining height, gaining breadth, gaining strength, all her organs changing shape and multiplying like giant bacteria. Her skin hardened into a scaly hide. Her arms sprouted claws. Her legs subdivided and lengthened into masses of tentacles. Her mouth widened into a gaping maw jam-packed with mandibles and pincers and fangs. Feelers erupted from her ears. Dozens of eyeballs oozed from her sockets like clusters of grapes.

Hate transformed her.

The girl with the scarred face was gone.

In her place stood the Beast, ravenous for revenge.

The beast rotated its grape-cluster eyes in a slow scrutiny of the glade. It saw the empty crates. It saw a grizzled old man lying flat on his back. It saw the death-pump boring into the earth.

With a slash of its claws, the Beast snapped the tripod and toppled the engine. With its pincers it mangled the wrapping of silver pipes. With its mandibles it ripped apart the flywheels and pistons. With its tentacles it uprooted the drill and bent it into a knot.

But where was the man who'd assembled the pump and set it in motion? Where was the evil little man with his bucket full of pain?

Moaning, the Beast lurched forth to hunt down its prey. It slithered past the old man who lay on his back. It clambered out of the glade and moved through the darkness toward the village, crushing ferns into wads of pulp under the bulk of its ever-expanding body, withering moss with acid secretions from the suction disks on its tentacles. When it burst through the last of the foliage and loomed over the bush tent, the Beast was twenty feet tall and still growing.

The Beast glowered down at van Downey. He was squatting next to the stormlight. He'd taken off his radiation armor. He crouched over the scattered case of the telecommunications console, staring at the green gel oozing out of its ruptured organic cell banks, cursing under his breath. When he heard the crackle of branches be-

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hind him, he leaped to his feet, whirled around, and gazed up at the slobbery jowls of the Beast.

Disbelief, horror, and hysteria chased each other across his face. His jaw dropped. His eyes bugged out. His oatmeal complexion turned chalk-white. As he cringed and shuddered, a crescent of blond hair fell across his forehead like the wing of a dove.

The Beast hesitated, puzzled by what it saw. Van Downey wasn't an evil little man. He was only a whimpering child.

Deep within the Beast a single cell of compassion began to glow. The cell doubled and doubled again. Thus, Becky Laffoon was born from the Beast. Just as the Beast had grown like a cancer inside Becky, now Becky grew like a garden inside the Beast. Van Downey's panic-stricken eyes, his quivering lip, his gasping breath—all these sensations rained down on her soul. She blossomed anew.

The Beast stooped over van Downey. Its maw opened, revealing row upon row of phosphorescent green fangs. Its slimy tongue flickered back and forth, spraying van Downey with droplets of foul saliva. Then from its throat came a strange sound — not a predatory snarl but a soft human voice:

"After all you've done, I ought to hate you, Mr. van Downey. No—that's not right. I ought to pity you. But pity's worse than hate. So what's left? Mr. van Downey, it's really hard to say this, but I'm going to try my hardest to *love* you . . ."

Van Downey's face changed from deathly white to carnation red. Shrieking, he whipped the silver cylinder out of his pocket and fired a ray of pink light straight into the Beast's face.

With a great sigh, like a sigh of immense relief, the Beast sank back, collapsing in on itself like a punctured blimp, and died.

XX

When Becky awoke, Unbefrontable was bending over her with the stormlight in his hand.

"Yew O.K., Laffoon?"

"Yes . . . I think so. What happened?"

"Yew tell me."

Blinking, she craned her neck and looked around.

"How'd we get back to the tent? The last thing I remember, I was accusing van Downey and he threw some of that awful nefarium ore in my face. It must have made me faint or pass out or something. Did it hit you, too?"

"Nope. Soon as yew went down, I squeezed off a shot at that schemin' skunk, but muh pistol musta backfired. Knocked me off muh feet. Guess we wuz both out cold fer a spell."

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"But . . ."

"Lemme finish, Laffoon. When I came to muh senses, yew wuz gone and so wuz van Downey. What I cain't figger out is what discombobulated that tomfool machine of his. It wuz all tore apart. Looked like a two-headed tornado picked it up and threw it back down again. Gave me the jim-willies. Yew don't know nothin' 'bout that?'

"No. I've been unconscious the whole time. I don't remember a thing."

"Yer a big help, Laffoon. As usual. Anyways, I hightailed it back toward the village to round up a search party. Turns out I didn't need to. I found yew on one side of the tent and van Downey on the other. Only difference wuz — he wuz dead and yew warn't."

"Dead!? Van Downey is *dead?*"

"See fer yerself."

He helped her up and led her around the tent. There lay van Downey, arms and legs awry, lips frozen in a hideous grin.

"That's another mystery I wuz hopin' *yew* could clear up. Ain't no marks on his body. Spoze a doctor'd call it cardiac arrest or apoplexy or some such, but look at his face — I reckon somethin' *scared* him to death."

"But . . ."

"Hang on, Laffoon. Hang on tight. I got one more mystery fer ya. Take a deep breath cuz this one's a doozy. It's gonna peel off yer socks."

He ducked into the tent and came back with a hand mirror from van Downey's shaving kit.

"Take a gander at that ugly kisser of yers, Laffoon,"

He held the square of glass in front of her nose.

"MY SCARS!"

"What scars?"

"I don't believe it . . ."

Cautiously she touched her face. With trembling fingertips she brushed her forehead, her cheeks, her chin. Everywhere the skin was soft and smooth.

All the knots and gnarls and wattles of greenish purple scar tissue had vanished — but where they'd been, the pigment of her skin was now blanched eggshell white with faint blue and orange highlights. It looked like someone had drawn an abstract design on her face with chalks or pastels.

"My scars are gone. Almost."

"Yup."

"But *how*? It's impossible. You don't think Old Three Arms could have done it — do you?"

"That old fake? Yer pullin' muh leg. The way I figger it, them scars musta got scorched off when van Downey tossed that bucketful of nefarium ore in yer face."

"That must be it! The nefarium did it! But who cares anyway? The only thing that matters is that I'm healed! It's a *miracle!*"

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"Holy con carne, Laffoon. Don't git carried away. Maybe a feller kin look at ya now without breakin' out in a cold sweat. but yew ain't eggzactly no beauty queen."

Becky snatched the mirror away from him and gazed intently into it. It struck her that the albino patterns on her face resembled war paint, or maybe a Halloween skeleton mask.

I look weird, all right, she decided, but kind of pretty, too, in an eerie sort of way.

Then she had a scary thought.

"What if it's just temporary? What if the scars grow back?"

"What if? What if? What if yer nose grows into a droopa snout? What if yer brain falls out of yer ear and ya step on it? Tarnation, Laffoon, how kin ya expect me to answer them what-if questions? I ain't no fortune-teller. Jist enjoy what ya got right now and let the future take keer of itself."

For a moment longer, Becky gazed at her new image. Suddenly she threw the mirror up and away and she laughed and hugged Unbefrontable and shouted at the top of her lungs and skipped around the tent waving her arms in the air. Then she sat down and cried for a long time.

Her shouts of joy attracted an audience of curious droopas. With Lubberplum's help, Unbefrontable enlisted a team of gravediggers to bury van Downey. Then he sent them back to their burrows and built a campfire.

Over a dinner of fried possum-moth with dumplings and hot coffee, he and Becky planned their next move.

"Won't Megalode Minerals wonder what happened to van Downey? What if they send someone else?"

"We gotta stop 'em right now. Fixin' up the *Me Too* might take too long. I figger we oughta pry loose the foredeck and use it fer a raft. That way we kin leave tomorrow. Be a rough trip, but quick, too. Soon as we git back to Misery, yew kin take them papers yew found in the tent and show 'em to the authorities. With Federax breathin' down their necks, them crooks at Megalode ain't likely to try no more fast ones on *this* planet."

"Back to Misery . . ." whispered Becky.

She thought about Dr. Pom and Dr. Belvedere. She thought about Gretel and Hing and Mbala and all the rest of her classmates.

"I'm sorry, Laffoon. I know ya hate the place, but—"

"Not anymore. I don't hate anything anymore. I was full of hate because everybody pitied me. Worst of all, I pitied myself. But that's all ancient history now."

She beamed.

"I'm well again, Unbefrontable. I'm well on the outside and well on the inside, too. I'll never be a monster again."

• • •

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Epilogue

Dodogax sat sulking in the gloom of his hut.

"Woofersnap brantbrooce," he grumbled. "Doop gumnibble pogo."

Instead of sitting here all alone, muttering to himself, how much more fun it would be if he were chattering away with the furless giants, showing off his mastery of their language.

But the furless giants were gone. They'd slipped through his grasp. One of them was six feet under the sod, feeding the gasworms, and the other two had split for the lowlands.

Such ingratitude! The female at least could have hung around for a while to show her appreciation. After all, his magic story had fixed her face. The scars were gone, and their colorful afterimage would fade away in a year or two. During that same time the magic would grow within her, and Dodogax felt sure she would blossom into the wisest and most beautiful of the furless giants' women.

It was strange. When she'd fallen asleep during his story, he'd felt his chest tingle with renewed life. It must have been her nightmare that did it: she'd thrown her limbs about and clenched her face in agony, and then the sheer intensity of her anguish had swept him up and made him once again a master of good magic.

He'd finished the story even though she was asleep. He'd told how Kikobad's ripper-fly brothers lifted her aloft on their tiny wings and carried her high into the sky and tossed her screaming into the fire of the twin suns, into the blazing eyes of Gornook, Giver of Warmth. And then he'd whispered the rest — how Kikobad came back on the tongue of Loola, the largest moon, Sweet Mouth of the Night, and how she walked among her people in a new beauty, the slimmest and most attractive of all the droopa maidens, her face a blossom of moonlight in the darkness.

But now the furless giant girl was gone. She'd given him the old eat-and-run without so much as a word of thanks.

Sighing, Dodogax decided to forget the furless giants and get back into that great vision trance about his wedding night with Haruharu. He closed his eyes and tried to concentrate.

But he just couldn't do it. He was too upset.

Poor old droopa! Wallowing in self-pity, he sighed again. There was only one consolation. His third arm was working great again.

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Count Zero, William Gibson, Arbor House, $15.95

Burning Chrome, William Gibson, Arbor House, $14.95

and

Writers of The Future, Algis Budrys, Ed. Bridge, $3.95

We're going to review the two Gibson books together — *Count Zero* is a novel, *Burning Chrome* is a short-story collection — and then we'll go on to other things.

You can take it as given that Gibson is beyond criticism as a writer; there is nothing anyone can do to change his approach, because for him it is not a matter of choice. He is his own and his only preceptor, and what we're doing in this column amounts to [A] an intuited report on what he has taught himself so far, and [B] some commentary on paradoxes attending.

What I mean by [A] is that there are lots of ways through which "good" writing occurs; there are so many that not even Rudyard Kipling ever counted them all. One of the most striking discoveries you make soon after breaking into the company of professional writers and doing some shoptalk is that there is no one way of arriving at the marks on the manuscript paper, and that few of them are like yours. You have, by some apparently erratic but ultimately successful method, navigated across a gulf no chart but yours can describe to your exact satisfaction.

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When you arrive at last on the shore of that Huy Brasil of "being a writer," you find plenty of companions, and at first there is much agreement on such matters as where that gulf was, but after a while you begin to notice that you are not in truth all using the same scale of measurement or, it begins to dawn, even speaking of exactly the same gulf.

You may — or may not — all be sitting in the same grog shop at perhaps the same time, and enjoying the evident conviviality. But the suspicion grows that each of you came here from his or her own parallel universe, in which the leaves on the trees take shapes not totally like those on yours and the acceleration of gravity varies somewhere between 30 and 34 feet per second per second. Nor is it incontrovertibly clear that all of you *are* sitting in the same Huy Brasil at the same time. Sometimes when you reach out to touch one another, your hands pass right through.*

But, once again, I am waxing poetic when I ought to be polishing my expository skills. The presently relevant phenomenon included among the things being referred to above is the fact that there are writers who don't know what they're doing, in the best sense. There are other writers — all of the other kinds of writer, however many there be —who can tell you exactly what they're doing. To them, writing is the same as designing, say, an automotive engine is to an appropriately specialized engineer. There is at first, to be sure, an instinct for and an imagined interior representation of how this device will be viably different from other engines. But after that it's a process of looking up the properties of known materials in standard reference tables, of determining the most cost-effective path for processing those materials into the optimum configurations attainable with the available production facility, and of going to a drafting table and describing your invention in standardized patterns as available from a standard drawing machine.

Some of the most admired works in our field have been created in this way. It is how Alfred Bester wrote *The Demolished Man,** for example, and once you understand the analogy you can fully fathom his admiration and respect for his editor, Horace Gold. Gold, a similarly organized craftsman, so to speak looked up some of the more arcane reference tables for Bester and

**And sometimes that is a very good thing.*

**See also Bester's "straight" novel of that time,* Who He? *a television-industry story which is* The Demolished Man *written down to mundane levels. Unfortunately, the template that had been so successful with SF audiences was intrinsically too witty for the "real" world, even though Bester tried to keep himself in check. The book did not do well, and eventually disappeared as a paperback named* The Rat Race *(not to be confused with "Jay Franklin's" mid-century novel about a parallel world into which the hero is thrust by the explosion of a U.S. Navy thorium bomb).*

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guided him into finding some of the least likely shapes into which known machinery could carve stock materials if one were a far better than average machinist on a particularly clear-headed day. The book — and such echoes of it as *The Stars My Destination* and the memorable short-stories and novelettes clustered around that period in Bester's life — are triumphs of the method and ornaments to our field.

Writers of this general sort — I cannot say Bester specifically — are incredulous when confronted with the possibility that there might be some basically different way to produce an engine. Conversely, writers who produce differently are dismayed in various ways when they discover that so much elegant and admirable work is in fact "purely mechanical."

Unless they are fools, it's not a moral judgment they make, but a functional one. To them, the creation of a work is at once marvelous and, in any production context, laughably crude. For them, it is as if a person with an engine in mind went — usually, almost dazed — into an old storage shed and picked up whatever fit into the developing picture, if you trimmed it or shimmed it out a little . . . took part of a washing machine, part of a bicycle, half a cinder-block, some brass wood-screws, a length of hose, a coffee can, a sofa cushion, put them together under the guidance of how Rachmaninoff's second symphony made you feel on a particular summer's day at a bandshell in a twilight-softened park, and the damned thing looked like carved alloy and ran like an Offenhauser when you torqued down the head and cranked it over.

Let me tell you, that is a feeling. On the other hand, you can't describe how you did it, because you were guided by totally subjective feelings, most of them less than consciously understood. You can never do another one like it, no matter how much you might yearn to. On the other hand, no one can read the prints and imitate it so's it would fool you for a minute, although it might fool others for a while. On the other hand, when you look back at the seemingly endless picking and sorting through the rummage of yourself, the often painful associations as you recall how this once unbroken block or this now nominally broken device first came into your possession in quite another context, you come to wish, at times most grievously, for the engineer's library with its bound tables all in a row and its chrome-and-Formica stainless drafting machine.

You are your own materials-tester and your own production machinery operator, as well as your own designer. When something fails catastrophically, it fails all over you, and at times you suspect you must be quite mad, or at the very least suicidally impractical.

Hello, Bill.

A while ago — not too long ago — a slim, tall, very quiet Canadian named

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William Gibson published a short story called "New Rose Hotel" and a novel called *Neuromancer,* and a new school of writing SF was born. *Neuromancer,* as you must know by now, won the Philip K. Dick, Nebula and Hugo awards last year, to name just the top three of its various winnings. It also aborted SF's seemingly unstoppable trend toward interminably lengthy and classically romanticized works, and this burst of success also revealed the existence of several other writers — Bruce Sterling, John Shirley and Michael Swanwick, for three — whose work could be made to fit the "same" pattern, so that the "Cyberpunk" school could be named.

Now, once something has been named it must exist in fact, correct? Gardner Dozois named it, Norman Spinrad traces it back to Harlan Ellison — which makes sense if you stress the street-life aspect of the mode, and I believe that during a party conversation at Norwescon this past March, Gibson said something to me, softly, about a 1976 novel called *Michaelmas,* which ran here as a two-part serial and contained a scene in which a computer-housed personality reported on some unsettling experiences in the landscape of the data-world he perceived.

The mode, as it came to flower in *Neuromancer,* describes the blackly existential peregrinations of a street-wise hero, or someone whose *beau-ideal* is a street-wise hero, and whose preferred milieu is the data-terrain. Gibson calls these people "cowboys," though not all of them are male and not all of them continue to exist in the gross physical milieu. The latter is a near-contemporary Earth and some of its orbital stations; a heavily industrialized world dominated by Japanese electronics and a Eurasian biotechnology, and evidently so impressed with the Oriental *geist* that it lives crowded and scruffy even though there still ought to be quite a bit of room. It is not truly the future, in other words . . . it is today written large, just as Gernsback did it in his day.

Plugged into rigs that give them the advantage of being able to "see" schematic representations of the data-banks and -nets, the cowboys range over an electronic landscape that represents the world but is more real and elegant than it, doing this for a combination of hackerly kicks and of money; industrial espionage is a lucrative, if perilous, profession. Ipso facto, the cowboys are rustlers. Some, having been detected, captured and coerced by the forces of law and order, are pressed into service against their former comrades, or at least against that which gave them joy.

The prose format in which this mode is couched is, indeed, very reminiscent of Ellison in such stories as "Pretty Maggie Moneyeyes." But it is usually far more deadpan and less inclined to rub in its message than, for instance, "Repent, Harlequin, Said the Ticktockman." What is most engaging about it, apparently, is its fluid use of techie jargon both actual and invented, and its

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non-stop display of fresh gadgets, such as "claw," an unlikely — but momentarily plausible — biomedical technique that substitutes an engineered millipede for surgical stitching or stapling.

Speed equals stability in this kind of writing as much as it does in riding a bicycle. "Claw," thought about, seems just a piece of flash, yet it is crowded at once offstage by the next gadget, and the reader, casting a last glance over his shoulder as it dwindles down the backtrail, thinks, "Well, if it wasn't that appurtenance to the surgical-procedures scene, it would have been another." The result is as satisfactory as it would be if it were truly quantifiable; it is not only flash, it is very much identified as flash, therefore off the main point, therefore can be specious without making the story specious.

"Claw" appears, incidentally, in *Count Zero,* which while not a direct sequel to *Neuromancer* is set in the same universe, and develops some of *Neuromancer's* premises rather fruitfully. There is, for instance, quite a bit of space devoted to industrial sabotage and terrorism, in which the object is to kidnap or kill corporate employees who can generate valuable data, such as new biotechniques. There is also the introduction of voodoo.

Voodoo. The pantheon of that religion serves in *Count Zero* to provide a rationale for the electronic and biological technology and to personify its forces.

There is also sculptural art that can be and is perceived by the computerized person of a very rich collector who is in fact being kept physically alive, if that is the term, in a proliferated support system. He can't actually see, smell, taste, hear or touch anything, but he can generate "realities" into which non-computerized persons can be sucked, and where he can meet them under special circumstances which Gibson makes entirely believable. Of course, Gibson makes the voodoo analogy work, too.

What this is — and it is, by the way, ultimately a story about love, on a level of sophistication well beyond anything in *Neuromancer,* the stories in *Burning Chrome,* or what anyone in this field except Gene Wolfe and a very few others have attained — this story in which all the main characters are motivated by love or by abhorrence of it — is a work put together once, and once only, by a mind that creates directly from available materials within its storage. It does not replicate or sequelize *Neuromancer,* it completes it.

Hold that thought. Meanwhile, in *Burning Chrome,* we get seven Gibson short stories — I believe these are *the* Gibson canon, so rapidly has he moved up — an introduction by Bruce Sterling, and three collaborative stories; one each with Sterling, Shirley and Swanwick.

Swanwick was found by David Hartwell a few years ago for the SF issue of Northwestern University's *Tri-Quarterly* literary magazine. Shirley spends a

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great deal of time aggrandizing himself as a tough cookie on the model coinvented by Norman Mailer and Norman Spinrad, and once challenged Ellison to a duel with drawn literatures at ten paces or so. (His thesis was that he was really off the street and Ellison wasn't, which he failed to realize is totally off the point to most Ellison readers.) Sterling is the author of *Schismatrix*, a near-future, near-space biotech novel which I said out-cyberpunks Gibson, meaning it out-cyberpunks *Neuromancer* and "New Rose Hotel" and "Burning Chrome" et al, which is true and no longer relevant.

All three of these gents are nice guys with talent, and with the ambition to deliver much good reading over the years. But with *Count Zero* it comes clear that when Dozois lumped them all in together and gave them a common name, he put three (or more) oranges in with one apple, of which this field has as yet taken only its first bite.

These are enormously satisfactory books *qua* book. I can't imagine a better entertainment value, whatever level of entertainment you seek in SF. But Sterling's manifesto of an introduction to *Burning Chrome*, for all its brave phrasings and its declarations of intent to sweep the old aside and get on with the perfectable new, is at one with that "Gernsback Continuum" of which Gibson speaks so non-punkishly and fondly in his eponymous short story.

[B] Attendant paradox: They are going to look around one day soon, the cyberpunks, and discover that they have hared off into *here*, and William Gibson has wandered off *there*, and is holding a ball of string, a Zener-Blosser propelling pencil, a balloon, three cans of Dennison's hot chili, an axle from a Radio Flyer wagon and a GE steam iron with its pores clogged, and in the background, revving up to 15,000 rpm with all sixteen valves dancing like Cadmus's soldiers will be something unimaginable, until after Mr. Gibson has blinked, looked it, and said: "Of course!"

Would that the muse be as kind to any of the sixteen writers in *Writers of The Future, Volume II*, which I have had the honor to edit. It's too soon to tell, even in the case of Robert Touzalin, who wrote "Mudpuppies" and consequently won the $5000 L. Ron Hubbard Gold Award to The Author of the Writers of The Future Story of The Year. "Mudpuppies" — unlikely title —was selected by two panels of judges, one of which voted on the best story from among the four quarterly winners.

Let me explain, in the event I'm being cryptic. In 1983, L. Ron Hubbard set up a talent contest for "new and amateur" writers of speculative fiction. It's open to anyone who has professionally published no more than three short stories or one novellette, there's no entry fee, and every three months the judges award prizes of $1000, $750 and $500 respectively to the three best stories. No option in the story is con-

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veyed at any point in this process. But in 1984 it was decided to put the top stories, and some of the runners-up, into an anthology, for which the writers received a payment for limited rights. We added four how-to essays by some of the judges, I wrote some introductions to the stories, and we released the book simultaneously with an awards dinner in Beverly Hills. And we took a deep breath, and waited.

To date, *Writers of The Future, Volume I*, has sold 136,000 copies in the U.S. and Canada, which is pretty good going — well, all right, an absolutely stunning performance — for an original paperback anthology of fifteen stories by people you never heard of. They turned out to be pretty good stories, and an English edition, plus a variety of foreign-language editions, are coming out as you read this.

This year, the awards ceremony and book release occurred in Seattle, at Norwescon, which is not as glamorous as Chasen's restaurant but is a lot warmer and more fun. (For one thing, the party can last 48 hours, which is essentially what happened.) Besides Bob Touzalin's augmented award, which was given him by Jack Williamson and Anne McCaffrey — he held the trophy, she held the check — other highlights included presentations by Robert Silverberg, Gene Wolfe, Frederik Pohl, and Larry Niven, all of whom are on our panel of judges. (The others this past year were Gregory Benford, Stephen Goldin — who is the first-reader for the contest — Frank Herbert, Theodore Sturgeon, and Roger Zelazny. To break the tie that had developed. A. E. van Vogt was added to the Gold Award panel.)

I recommend the book. There are twelve prize-winners and three finalist stories, ranging from various sorts of fantasy to hard stef to something that might be *Moby-Dick*. There are illustrations by interesting new artists, there is a complete set of contest rules, and there are how-to essays by Gene Wolfe, Anne McCaffrey, Larry Niven, L. Ron Hubbard, and Frank Herbert. The Hubbard is from a work never before published to the general public. Its author did not live to receive his copy of the book. The Herbert is the last piece he ever wrote, dictated to me over the 'phone in a tight, controlled voice. And in this contest year, Theodore Sturgeon had died before he could read his last batch of stories.

I don't want to make too much of this. Why do we do it? Why do we help the young, why do we keep working even though the breath is stopped in our throats and the worm gnaws our vitals?

We must. We remember the gulf, and engines for its crossing, and though we be not all that much alike, yet we are alike. And Huy Brasil is a place of great quiet pleasure and of wondrous parties.

You're invited.

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Neil W. Hiller ("Peace Feelers," March 1986) returns with a story about a writer looking for fresh ideas and a contract he can live with . . .

First I Came to Los Angeles

BY
NEIL W. HILLER

He sat with his back to me at the closed patio door. I stopped in the middle of ankle-deep sulfur-colored carpet in the overheated office. The Doctor Is In, I thought. Ha'penny for the Old Guy. He was holding one of those silvered cardboard sun reflectors spread before him like a menu, watching me in it.

"Putrid color for a carpet," I remarked to his aluminized reflection.

The palms and shrubbery outside were limned in dazzling morning sunlight. Patches of it hopped from ripple to ripple on the blue mercury of the pool a few yards from where he sat, across intervening bleached concrete.

"So sue the decorator," he responded mildly.

The aerator in the fish tank set into the dark walnut bookshelves gurgled softly, bubbles issuing from the helmet of a pastel plaster figurine in a pressure suit brandishing a trident.

Orange tongues of flame licked at the three logs in the fireplace.

From what I could see of him over the chairback, he was small, narrow shoulders hunched under a charcoal gray sweater. He had thinning, stringy gray hair cut short above jutting ears with outcrops of small hairs silvered by original and reflected sunlight.

"So. How did you find me?" he asked, without turning.

"First I came to Los Angeles . . ."

He chortled, snapped the reflector shut, a final intensified gleam dancing briefly on the ceiling. He slipped into the black Gucci loafers he moved in front of him from beside his chair, stood and walked toward me.

His deeply tanned features were marred by occasional blotches and freckles along the hairline. Despite

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startling blue eyes, the color of the pool, he looked avuncular, almost gnomish.

"More the Ray Walston look than the Peter Cook, don't you think?" He asked me, smiling as he approached. "Please, have a seat," he motioned with his hand toward the couch facing the fire. "Take off your jacket, if you like. Make yourself at home."

I removed my jacket, laying it across the top of the couch, loosened my tie as I walked around one of its adjacent end tables and sat. He moved to the armchair on my left and, pulling up gently on the material at the knees of his red wool trousers, sat on the forward few inches of the chair, hands clasped between his knees.

"First you came to Los Angeles," he prompted.

"Then I started interviewing the Phillip Marlow types . . ."

"Not Christopher?"

"The Raymond Chandler types, then, in the 1930 gothics, the low-numbered buildings down on Wilshire Boulevard. Near what you *Angelinos* . . ." I was being sardonic. ". . . for some reason call 'downtown'".

"You're not telling me one of those two-fifty-a-day-plus-expenses guys found me?" he said, leaning back complacently.

"No. It wasn't that easy. I interviewed detectives until I found one who claimed to have what he called "damned good connections" — he grinned at that — "in the Department of Motor Vehicle Registration . . ."

"Aha . . ."

"Him I asked to get me a dump of all the limousines listed in Los Angeles County . . ."

"You couldn't *carry* a printout of all the limos in Los Angeles County."

". . . that were red and had vanity plates."

He chuckled, stood, stepped to the oversized desk behind us, pushed a few keys on the micro there with the fingers of his left hand.

"Apple?" I asked, turning and watching him from the couch.

"Uh-huh," he answered without looking up from the screen. "Couldn't resist. Don't know how I managed before I had one. You know Steve?" He glanced at me. I shook my head. "Had a little downfall of his own." He looked down, pushed some more keys, waited. "Must have forgotten to read the fine print." He chuckled to himself.

"Speaking of print," he jerked his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the credenza behind him as he waited for the screen to fill. "I get my hard copy off that Diablo." He smiled over the top of the computer at me.

"You're right, too," he said, looking down again. "Only seventeen red limos with vanity plates in L.A." He pushed another button. "Bet you there are a lot more than that in Houston."

I turned, rose, went to the bookcase. They were all there, in a special section next to the fish tank: Goethe, Twain, *The Divine Comedy, The Year*

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the Yankees Lost the Pennant, even a videotape in a small leather sleeve of *Miss Jones*. "You're quite the collector," I said over my shoulder.

"Naturally," he said from right behind me. I turned, startled at his proximity, stepped sideways. "Sam Clemens signed that one next to *Yankees,"* he boasted, walking to his chair and sitting.

"'Course the Yankees aren't what they used to be, either. Last season all George wanted was a decent center fielder who could steal a hundred bases a year for him for under ten thousand dollars apiece."

I reshelved the Goethe, returned to the couch, regarded him. He leaned back into his chair. "You were saying?"

"After I had the list, I concentrated for a few days on the guy up in Bel Aire with the DANTE plate," I told him. "I even went to one of his parties for a couple of days. Thought I had my . . ." I paused. ". . . man. But in the end, he turned out to be a genuine producer."

"Yeah," he said, staring into the fire. "It's pretty hard to reckon with those guys sometimes. They do keep on trying to come up with an Original Sin." He turned to look at me, laughing at his own line again. "But some of the stuff they do *on* the screen manages to be pretty venal," he said defensively.

"Anyway," I said, putting my arm across the top of the couch, my hand lying across my jacket. "I figured that you had to be a little more *elusive* than the guy with DANTE plates in Bel Aire. So I reviewed the printout again. That's when MILDRED occurred to me as a possibility."

"Why? Perfectly normal name, Mildred. Guy with a twenty-room pied-à-terre up in the Hills loves his secretary, loves his stretch Mercedes. Names it after her. Happens all the time out here."

"That's what I thought at first. Then it occurred to me that you were supposed to be devious." His head snapped up, grin gone, eyes gleaming at me. Just right. "Subtle," I corrected myself. He smiled again, subsiding. "I wondered. MILD RED might be the way to read it, or even with an elision, MILD DRE'D. It seemed worth checking out. And when I found out you were a *psychiatrist*, I was, of course, pretty certain. Then I phoned."

"O.K., so you found me. So now, what do you want? I'm as busy as . . . the dickens today. Gotta testify in court later this morning. Not one of my judges. Going to get a guy who killed his brother-in-law with a cleaver off on a temporary insanity in the ordinary way." He frowned, not liking the line.

"You don't swear, do you?"

"I affirm, usually. Sometimes I promise. But I'm not here to chat about my oaths, or even a license plate. What do you want from me? And you

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can just forget the whole thing if being Thomas Jefferson is what you're after."

"Jefferson?" I asked incredulously. "Well, I'll be . . . Come on, tell me you didn't get Jefferson."

He frowned. "No. But I got his buddy, Ben Franklin, all right. Boy I tell you those parties we used to have after the executions." He guillotined the air with the edge of a hairy hand. "The Old Ambassador was really into the French Revolution. You know, *libertē,ēgalitē, fraternitē*. Fraternity particularly. People really used to wonder how an old guy — eighty he was — could keep it up. The partying, I mean."

He pressed a button concealed along the edge of the table next to him. A matronly woman with a dour face, salt-and-pepper hair drawn back in a severe bun, entered a moment later, waited by the door. "A Bloody for me, Mildred," he said over his shoulder. "Heavy on the Tabasco," and more quietly to me, "Can Mildred get something for you? New Coke? Something to drink?"

"Coffee," I told him. "Black." She heard me, turned and left. "Her? One of *yours*?" I asked, surprised.

"No. She's a *tight* woman," he reflected. "I took her on because I owed the archbishop a favor. . . . But if it's the other kind you're interested in," he brightened and pulled out the drawer in the table next to him. "I've got some pictures here of a former Miss America that'd knock your socks . . ."

"No thanks," I said, eyes avoiding the glossy studio shots he brandished as I watched Mildred, who had returned with a tray, stooping, unperturbed, to set down my coffee from it on the table in front of me. She moved toward him, dropped a napkin on the table, set his drink on it, and left.

"Guess Bob's going to get them again this time," he said philosophically, raising the crimson glass to his lips after dropping the contortionist photos back into the open drawer and shutting it with a sigh.

"What about Jefferson?" I reminded him. I sipped from the coffee. Hot.

He set his glass down and studied it reflectively. "Guys are all the time coming to me wanting to be Thomas Jefferson," he said somewhat petulantly. "Usually I can bargain 'em down just a couple of days, even stick them with a sudden-death option clause. You know, like the one in those new mortgages?"

He looked at me for appreciation. "But even at that, enough guys take me up on it that they've got Jefferson's history screwed-up to a fare-thee-well. Seems like his biographers are finding out new stuff about him every day. Chemists, financiers, farmers, politicians — they all want to be Thomas Jefferson. They've got the Standard Edition of his personal writings up to twenty volumes now, three of 'em written in the past five years alone. I had the same sort of problem with Edison a few years back . . ."

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I looked at him. It was getting to be time. "I don't want to be Thomas Jefferson," I said simply.

"Let me try to guess. A rock star. I tell you, that Brit who plays in his long underwear, the one with the mango face?" I nodded. "That guy had some kind of agent. Even after twenty years I don't *believe* the contract I let that guy have. Said all *he* ever wanted to do was cause pandemonium . . ."

"No."

"Rich, then. That it? You know, I've done an awful lot for the GNP over the years. The GOP, too, for that matter. I've made a lot of people rich. Never let too much of it 'trickle down,' either." He smiled. "In fact, the past couple of years, I've had to do some fine-tuning on the downside price of oil, just to remind people whom they were dealing with. Had a lot of good old boys in the Anadarko Basin combing over their contracts, looking for gaps. Overseas,too.

"The colonel was so mad at me I had to give him a whole squadron of of MiG-21's to keep his mind off the spot market. Son of a gun *still* wanted to hold out for what he kept on calling 'only a little thermonuclear device.'"

"I am rich," I reminded him. "My old man, maybe you knew him, wrote assembler programs starting back when computers still had vacuum tubes. When I was in college, he sold his software company to General Computer for megabucks. When he died a few years ago, none of his wives got enough to make a serious dent in what I got as number one son . . ."

"My friends slip up? You know, the IRS," he said, eyeing the room.

"Nah. He had another one of 'your friends' — you know, the tax lawyers — working for him," I mimicked him.

"Listen, we gotta finish soon," he said, glancing at his gold watch. "Your forty-five minutes are almost up." Then, slipping back into character: "You got your father's money, so the designer drug concession for the Valley is probably out. And you don't strike me as the type who wants a ride on the Shuttle, like the senator."

I shook my head again. ". . .so that's out. And women, too" — he patted the table next to his drink, glancing at me regretfully, then brightened. "Say, what about men . . ."

"I'd sell my soul for a workable plot for a Faust story," I told him truthfully. He studied me, leaning back, rubbing his chin. I hadn't meant to sound earnest, flip had seemed best. But I couldn't help it. I continued, confessing. Who was he for me to be ashamed in front of, anyway? "My stuff keeps coming back from publishers and magazines saying, 'I'm afraid I don't see anything new here.' Sure, a few of my things have seen print, but I figure I need a keystone piece. Something that will get noticed. Maybe makes things easier for the rest of my writing.

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"A novel would be great," I went on, "but I'd settle for a decent short story — if you'd give me a reasonable contract, one I could live with, I mean."

He stood, began unbuttoning the sweater, no more smiles. "You'd sign?" he asked. "For that?" I nodded again. "No wonder I almost lost Norman. I guess I've never really appreciated how easy you artsy types," he glanced down at me, "and would-be artsy types, could be. And after all my experience," he waved to the special section on the bookshelf, shaking his head.

I watched him as he walked to the fish tank, head bent, thinking. He slipped out of the sweater, stuffed it into a drawer. "Well?" I asked him. Despite everything, I wasn't quite sure that it was going to work. That it could work.

He walked to the desk. I stood, watched him as he shrugged into the dark blue blazer from the chairback. "I will accept your deal," he paused. I let out the sigh. "Standard contract, too. But on one condition."

"What condition," I asked, more than a little suspicious, after all . . .

"You've got to leave my name out of it. I've got enough . . ." he paused for the right word, ". . . clients to work with. I don't need any more voluntary business like yours."

"I agree," I said formally.

"It's on the Apple," he said, walked to the door, turned holding it open to leave. "Don't forget my fee for this," he leered. "Your story's under filename 'House,' just like you asked. It's on the disk in the B: port. You'll be able to read it on the screen as it dumps. But you know the setup."

In a different voice, he added: "The last thing off the printer will be your contract. Don't forget to sign it before you go. I don't want to have to chase you all over . . . creation." He grinned one last time. "After I've kept my half of our bargain." The door clicked shut.

I rose, went to the closet, hung up my jacket from the back of the couch. I walked over behind the desk to the computer. I sat down, faced the screen, a little disappointed again. There was a lot more work to do.

I called up "House," punched up the print commands on the lime-on-charcoal screen before me.

The Diablo whined softly to life, then began chirruping merrily across the page as the text scrolled up in front of me. I read from the screen.

He sat with his back to me at the closed patio door.

The print clacked across the screen. I leaned back, fingers laced behind my head, read.

I stopped in the middle of ankle-deep sulfur-colored carpet in the overheated office. The Doctor Is In, I thought. Ha'penny for the Old Guy.

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In "By the River, Fontainebleau" Stephen Gallagher ("To Dance By the Light of the Moon, (Jan. 1986) shares an eerie vision of infatuation. Beauty is, indeed, in the eyes of the beholder . . .

By the River, Fontainebleau

BY
STEPHEN GALLAGHER

We sheltered under the great oak for more than an hour, watching as the rain came down in sheets. The sky was as dark as old lead, and when the thunder came it seemed to shake the very soil of the forest. Even Antoine couldn't pretend that this was nothing more than a brief spring shower, and so we sat together in a bleak silence with our packs at our feet and our oilskin coats over our heads. It was then, I suppose, that I really came to my decision.

When the rain finally stopped, we shouldered our baggage and walked on. The lane had now mostly turned to mud, and a weak sun showed through the trees and raised a mist from the sodden ground. I wasn't in much of a mood to appreciate it, but after a while Antoine started to whistle. Ten minutes or so later, we came to a shallow, fast-running river where the lane disappeared and reemerged over on the far side, and so wet and miserable was I by this time that I waded in to make the crossing without hesitation or complaint. Every step was taking me nearer to home, and this was all that I cared for.

But it soon became obvious that the track would take us no farther than the farm that stood on the opposite bank, as it led straight into a yard that had no exit. It was a mean-looking place, charmless and squalid even in the late-afternoon sunlight, and my immediate impulse was to turn around and walk away. But Antoine, ever an optimist, said, "You think they'll take pity and feed us?"

"They're more likely to hit us over the head and rob us," I told him. "You stay here and look after the gear. I'll ask the way."

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I left him and went on into the yard, looking for some sign of life. A few hens were picking over the barren ground close to where four scrawny goats stood in a makeshift pen, and a dog was barking somewhere over beyond the barn. The corner of the yard to my left was shaded by a large chestnut tree, and it was on the dry beaten earth in the shelter of this that I saw a terrible sight.

It was an underweight pig, trussed and made ready for slaughter; this was obviously the farm's regular spot for killing, because hooks had been fixed to the tree's lower branches for carcasses to be hung as they bled. What made the sight so terrible was the way in which the pig had been prepared. Each of its feet had been cut at the knuckle, sliced right back so that the bone showed bloodless and white. Those bound-together limbs were almost severed, but still the pig squirmed as it tried to stand.

I turned my head aside, and went on by. It was out in the open on the far side of the barn that I finally found the people that I was looking for; and an unwashed, surly crowd they turned out to be, a father and four brothers with narrow faces and a dark, piercing stare. They were hauling logs for cutting, but all work stopped when they saw me. As I addressed myself to the older man, the others simply stood and watched, their mouths open and their hands hanging by their sides whilst a dim spark of intelligence burned in each pair of eyes. It went badly until I realized that money was the key that would unlock their patient and persistent misunderstanding, and then at the end of the process I learned nothing more than that the only way to regain the Paris road would be to return along the track by which we'd arrived. I thanked the farmer — feeling defeated and foolish, because really I ought to have been cursing him — and trudged back to Antoine.

Antoine was where I'd left him. The packs with our easels and our brushes and our sketchbooks were at his feet, and he was leaning on the wall with a distant, thoughtful expression on his face. He was looking toward the chestnut tree. This was something that I'd avoided doing on my way back, but now I had to turn and see what it was that was affecting him so; and it was then that I realized that the trussed pig had been taken away at some time during my short absence, and that a different scene was now before him.

"I'm staying, Marcel," he said.

I didn't understand. "Staying where?"

"Right here. They must have a room or a loft or a barn, and they're not going to turn down good money. And it's late, and I'm tired . . ."

"Any other reason?" I said, and I gave a pointed glance across to where, under the chestnut tree, a young girl was now standing and unselfcon-

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sciously brushing her hair. She was looking into a broken old mirror that she'd hung from one of the butchery hooks, and she didn't seem to be aware of us at all. She was barefoot, and in a cotton shift so damp and clinging that it was plain she wore nothing underneath. To my eyes she was nothing more than an ordinary farm girl, too heavy for grace and probably too dull for conversation . . . but who could say what she was to Antoine? I'd already learned, during the weeks of our walking tour, that his eyes and mine often seemed to see by a different light. Now, in answer to my question, he was smiling and saying nothing more.

"Then," I said, "you stay alone, Antoine."

This surprised him. "Are we going to argue over this?"

"No," I said, leaning on the wall beside him, "Not an argument. I simply don't want to get in your way. It's over for me, Antoine, and there's no point in me pretending otherwise. I've had enough of walking and sketching and being face-to-face with nature. I've yawned through sunrises and I've shivered through the rain, and if I died without ever seeing another tree or village or field of wheat, I'd be dying happy. What I'm trying to say is that I'm not an artist, Antoine. If these past few weeks have been the test, then I'm admitting that I've failed. I'm footsore and I'm aching, and I've got nothing left to prove. I'm going back to Paris tonight."

This had been my decision, back in the forest and under the oak. The excursion that had seemed so appealing to two young would-be painters had turned into a drudgery of patchy weather and drafty inns and a yearning for home; I'd carried on sketching only as a kind of dogged duty, something that I wouldn't have bothered with if Antoine hadn't been there. I hadn't looked back through the pages, and didn't care to. My artistic talent, I'd realized, wasn't strong enough to survive outside of the most pampered of drawing room conditions — which, I suppose, meant that it wasn't a real talent at all. A useful way of persuading young women to undress for me, perhaps, but not art.

"Oh, Marcel," Antoine said with sympathy. "Has it really been hell for you?"

"I'm going to be a dull citizen, Antoine," I told him. "I was *born* to be a dull citizen. It took a trip like this to make me realize how much I'd been looking forward to it."

He glanced across the yard again, to where the plain farm girl stood beneath the chestnut tree. For a moment it seemed that her eyes strayed from the mirror and met his, but her face betrayed nothing at all.

"I can't come with you," he said.

"I understand that."

I told him where to find the farmer, and while he was gone I transferred all of the pastels and the paints and

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the charcoal sticks from my luggage into his own. It was a strange feeling; the feeling of letting go of a dream. It was relief and regret, inextricably mixed. I also gave him my two untouched canvases in their carrying frame, and my fixing atomizer. When Antoine returned, he told me of the terms that the farmer had fixed for him to stay on; put simply, they were giving him two weeks in their barn with whatever meals the family could spare, in return for every franc that he carried. I was horrified, but Antoine was unruffled. He made me promise that I would go to his father and collect his monthly allowance, and that before the two weeks expired I would return with the money. Although I wouldn't have cared if I never saw the forest of Fontainebleau again, I was uneasy at the notion of leaving Antoine completely at the mercy of his new obsession. This way, at least, I'd be able to check on him.

He walked with me back to the river. There was little more than an hour of daylight left, and I had some way to go. Before I set out across the ford, I said, "What shall I tell your father?"

"Whatever you like," he said. "Whatever you think he needs to hear. But do it for me, Marcel."

I'd have said more, but he was already casting a longing look back toward the yard. A half hour's familiarity made it seem no less squalid to me than it had been at first sight . . . but, as I said, Antoine often seemed to see things with a different eye. An artist's eye, perhaps. My test had come and gone; and the next two weeks would be his.

I stayed that night in Barbizon, and made it back to Paris by the next evening. I entered the family home by the back door, partly because I was ashamed of what I saw as my failure, but mostly because I was aware that I looked like a tramp. The next few days saw the beginning of the process of my absorption into the family's business dealings, a strange world of ledger entries and manifests that somehow bore a relation to real ships that sailed somewhere out on real oceans. I was given a position as an apprentice clerk, in order that I should be able to learn from the most fundamental of basic principles.

Even though I'd known what to expect, the long hours and the rigid timekeeping came as something of a shock to me. I'd sent out a note to Antoine's parents assuring them of his safety as soon as I'd arrived home, but it wasn't until the Friday that I was able to go and see them in the evening with his request.

The news was not good. My own father, to his credit, had been willing to let my preoccupations run themselves out; it was as if he'd foreseen the final result and quietly made his

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preparations for when that time came around. Antoine's father had no such patience. All that he gave me was a message: There would be no allowance until Antoine abandoned his games and returned home.

Saturday was a half-day, and as soon as my work was finished I set out for the railway station. It was late in the afternoon before I finally came into sight of the farm again. The place was much as I remembered it, although I daresay that I had changed in its eyes; I now wore my one decent suit and overcoat, and came prepared for the shallow river crossing.

It was a warm day. Spring was slipping toward summer, and the breeze no longer cut. The broken looking glass was still hanging under the chestnut tree, and it swung lightly back and forth as I stood in the doorway to the barn and called Antoine's name. He'd been sleeping *here*? Half of the place was taken up with hay, all the way to the upper loft, and there was nothing in the way of furniture. The slatted walls were badly fitted, and some of the gaps in the planking were a hand's width. But this was his lodging, all right, because over on the clear part of the floor I saw his easel and a stool and some of his materials laid out. Antoine's possessions, but no Antoine. I set out to search.

I finally found him in a clearing no more than two hundred meters from the barn. The girl, as I'd half expected, was with him. She was sitting on the ground with her hands clasped around her knees as Antoine sketched her; but on seeing me, with a cry of "Marcel!", he threw aside his pad and jumped up to greet me.

I'll confess that I was shocked, although I hid it well. In the space of less than a week, he'd deteriorated like a man in the grip of a serious illness. He seemed thinner, and there were dark rings round his eyes that made them seem sunken and staring; but his manner was lively enough, and he seemed pleased to see me . . . although how much of this was genuine eagerness and how much of it was due to the money that he assumed I'd brought with me, I couldn't say.

They had a basket with them, and together we dined on cheese and rough wine and bread that had the texture of damp thatch. Antoine introduced the girl as Lise, short for Anneliese; I knew within a moment of hearing her speak that she was no native French girl, although her accent was one that I couldn't place. She seemed shy and ate nothing, and took only a little of the wine.

Antoine gave me his sketchbook to look through, just as we'd done at the end of each of our days together. As I'd expected, he'd been spending all of his time on the girl, switching between head studies and full-length portrayals, some of them hardly more than a few swift lines depicting the

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essence of some moment of motion. Although I didn't show it, I was disappointed. I was hoping that there would be some sign here, some showing-through of the vision that had motivated him, but each drawing seemed little more than a technical exercise. Perhaps there was nothing to envy here after all, I thought. Nothing other than a casual infatuation made practical by the artist-model relationship — a situation that I, at least, could understand, although I was strangely disappointed that I found nothing more.

Lise asked if Antoine was finished with his sketching for the day, and then excused herself. I noted a certain pain in Antoine's eyes as he watched her go.

"Who is she?" I said as soon as she was decently out of earshot.

"I don't know. She's an orphan, I think. The family just ignores her."

"Does she work on the farm?"

"I don't think so," he said, his face reflecting some of his uncertainty as if it was a question that he'd thought over a number of times in the past few days. "I can't be sure. She disappears for hours at a time, but . . . it's not important, anyway. Did you speak to my father?"

I had no choice then but to give him the hard news. I saw his face fall, and the air of vague contentment that had offset the wasting of his features was replaced by a kind of desperation.

"Then I don't know what to do," he said. "They won't let me stay here without money. They've bled me white already. You don't understand these people."

"Not half as well as they seem to understand you," I told him. "It *is* because of the girl, isn't it?"

He looked down, and didn't answer.

"Then," I went on, "why don't you simply take her away?"

But he was dismissing the idea even before I'd finished suggesting it. "That's not possible," he said. "It pains her to walk any distance." And then, going on as if this minor quibble had been enough to put an end to the entire argument, he was getting to his feet and saying, "I can see only one way out. You'd better come with me."

He said nothing more as he led the way back toward the barn. Over by another of the outbuildings, I saw one of the four sons watching us as we passed. He made no sign toward us, and Antoine didn't even glance his way.

Lise wasn't there when we arrived, nor did Antoine seem to expect her to be. He went over to the easel, and I followed; and then I waited as he hesitated for a moment before drawing away the paint-splashed cloth that had been draped to protect the canvas.

It was a painting, in full oils. I stood amazed. It was wonderful.

It showed that vision of the first moment in which Antoine had seen

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Lise under the chestnut tree. It was every detail that I'd seen, but transformed; I now realized that I'd been so preoccupied with my own discomfort that I'd been aware of almost nothing, nothing at all. Lise stood, hairbrush in hand, dappled in late-afternoon sunlight with soft blue shadows behind her. In her plain features was a kind of quiet beauty as she studied her image in the glass; I knew instinctively that it was a sad picture, a celebration of the brevity of all experience and of life itself.

And as I looked, I felt something within me die. I thought of my own pretty, nondescript Fontainebleau landscapes, and finally knew for sure that my decision had been a right one. My technique was as good as Antoine's, if not slightly better, but technique was only half of the story. To paint, one first had to see. And I didn't, until led to it.

"You have to take it to Paris for me," he said. "Sell it for whatever you can get."

I nodded slowly. There was no question about it now, I would help him however I could. "I'm envious, you know," I said.

"Don't be," he said, staring at his own canvas as if it disturbed him, somehow. "The things we want most aren't always the things that make us happy."

To be going on with, I gave him most of the money that I had with me, including what I had set aside for a night's lodging before returning to the town. I sensed a certain reluctance in Antoine as we climbed a ladder and he showed me the upper loft where I could sleep, but I took it as a natural aversion to charity between friends. I didn't see it that way; if I was going to be a bourgeois, I thought ruefully, I might as well go the whole hog and become a patron of the arts.

A blanket in the hay was not my idea of comfort, but it was all that was available. I was warm enough, but the hay stuck at me through the thin wool from every angle; and though my overcoat, rolled, made a reasonable pillow, I couldn't help wondering what it would look like when I came to shake it out in the morning. No wonder Antoine was looking such a wreck, I thought, after a week of this.

I don't know what time it was when I awoke, but it must have been somewhere around two or three o'clock. I lay uneasy, looking at where the cloudy moonlit sky showed through the spaces in the walls, and I heard voices from below. They were whispering, but the night was so still that it was impossible not to hear.

"I remember leaving you and your friend," Lise was saying. "I was so tired after sitting for you this morning. But I don't remember where I went."

"You went where you always go," I heard Antoine say. "To the big stack

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of straw, behind the house. You made yourself a space and you burrowed down inside."

"But the next thing that I knew, it was dark and I was standing out under the tree again. I was exhausted, and it was as if I'd been running. What had I been *doing*?"

"You were sleeping, that's all. Like you always do."

But Lise seemed scared, unable to accept so simple an explanation. "But you know this?" she said insistently. "You've seen me?"

There was a long silence from Antoine. And then he said, "Yes."

I heard her moving slightly, making the hay rustle. She said, "I sometimes feel as if you're the only one who really sees me. As I am, I mean. As if, when you close your eyes, I no longer exist . . . because I didn't, in a way, before you came along."

Antoine said, "That's just foolish talk."

Her next question was one that I wouldn't have expected. She said, "Who am I, Antoine?" And she sounded lost and miserable, as if the answer would never be known.

"Sleep, now," he told her.

It was a good suggestion, and one that I wished I could follow; but further sleep seemed to elude me, and all that I could do was to squirm miserably in that itchy byre. Antoine's breathing became deep and noisy, which was of no help. And after a while I heard the sound below of somebody rising and making their way toward the door of the barn.

Moving as silently as I could, I crawled over to the trap by which I'd entered the loft, and peered down. Lise was at the doorway, framed in moonlight, and she was looking back at Antoine. I could not make out her expression, but her general attitude suggested a regretful leave-taking. Of Antoine himself, I could see little more than the creamy blur of his shirt in the darkness. Then she turned, and walked out into the yard.

A board creaked as I moved across to the unglazed window from where I'd be able to see down into the yard, but Antoine didn't stir. She was moving quickly now, a faint shape in a simple dress, and she was heading toward the back of the house as Antoine had said; and then as I watched, I saw another form rise from the shadows to meet her. This was, I guessed from his brutish outline, either the farmer or one of his four sons, and he seemed to have been waiting; I saw him raise a rod or a switch of some kind, and to swipe at the air with it as if to speed her in the direction in which she was already going. He followed her through the gap between the buildings, and then bent to something that I couldn't see; but then I heard the scrape of a wooden gate across the rutted dirt, and the bang of it falling shut.

When they were gone from sight, Lise being casually driven ahead like

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some common farm animal, I returned to my blanket. It was obvious that she'd been expected, up and away the moment that Antoine was fully asleep like a sheep being called to the fold at the end of the day. And having seen the way in which she'd been treated, I could only reflect that perhaps she'd been right; that Antoine's vision of her differed so much from theirs that it was almost as if he'd actually created her beauty out of some more basic stuff, to which she could revert only when Antoine's attention moved elsewhere, as in sleep.

And sleep, unexpectedly, was what these idle and speculative thoughts led me to.

Breakfast was left outside for us in the morning. It was meager but decent. Antoine carefully packed the picture, wary of the paint that was still soft in patches; he called it *La Jeune Fille au Miroir*, The Looking-Glass Girl. Lise sat aside and watched us; she'd returned to the barn at some time before I'd woken, I didn't know when. She said little, and ate nothing. I now found it difficult to imagine how I could ever have thought her plain.

I suppose that, to develop my fanciful thought from the night before, I now saw her as through Antoine's eyes. My own first impression now counted for nothing; it was not that I had simply changed an opinion to acquiesce to the views of another, but more that I'd found the actual fabric of my world transformed by the intensity of his vision. But it was an intensity that was draining him, I could see; he looked no better physically now than he had when I'd arrived, and seemed perhaps even a little worse. I wondered if a taste of success from the sale of the painting might nourish him.

I was on my way before ten, knowing that I had a long walk and a carriage drive ahead of me before I'd even reach the railway. My toughest boots had leaked a little during the river crossing the previous day, but they'd dried out overnight and Antoine went out to negotiate a ride of some kind so that I wouldn't be restarting the journey with a squelch. I didn't hear what was said or what was promised, but after ten minutes a dilapidated trap pulled by an even more dilapidated pony came rattling into the yard.

The morning sun struck a shimmering light from the river as we waved our good-byes and my transport jarred its way into the rutted crossing. My driver was one of the four brothers that I'd seen on my first visit to the farm, and I wondered if he might have been the one who had waited in the yard for Lise in the moonlight. I thought about asking . . . but he hadn't said one word to me so far, and seemed unlikely to. He sat with his shoulders hunched, and his

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eyes apparently fixed on the horse's rear end. I was half expecting to be set down on the opposite bank, but it soon became clear that Antoine's bargaining would take me farther as we continued, wheels dripping, down the lane. I turned for one last wave to Antoine's solitary figure, and then I faced front with *La Jeune Fille au Miroir* held protectively by my side.

I had a strange feeling of loss, as if I'd left a world that I might never be sure of reentering. The river was its boundary, the banks its borderland.

Ten minutes later, as we came into sight of the main crossroads, my coachman spoke.

"We've told your friend," he said suddenly and without any preamble, "we can't eat his pictures. When his money's gone, so's he."

It was a moment before I could be certain that I was the one being addressed; he hadn't lifted his eyes from the mare's backside. But when I was sure, I said, "Would you consider letting Lise come away with him?"

I watched for a reaction but saw none. He simply said, "Why?"

"She doesn't work for you, she isn't one of you . . . there's no future for her here. Antoine's family is very rich. He could set her up in apartments of her own and give her an income. She could send you money."

It was my boldest stroke, but it was having little effect; he was shaking his head slowly, and this angered me.

"It's rather late to start considering her moral welfare, isn't it?" I demanded. "Since you see fit to send her out to sleep in a barn with strangers."

"That doesn't matter," he said, reining the nag in so that we came to a half at the empty crossroads. "She can't leave, that's all."

Such were my initial efforts on Antoine's behalf; and I now have to report that I had little more success in my new role as artist's agent. I gave my choice of dealer a lot of thought, and settled on one whom I believed would be sympathetic to the picture's fresh and quite modern approach to its subject; he had, I knew, recently made a buying trip to England and returned with several works of Constable that were considered to be almost revolutionary in their treatment of nature. I left the painting in his hands for several days, and then called on him to check on progress.

He'd found a buyer. But when I heard the sum on offer, my initial excitement died and went cold within me.

"So little?" I said. "But . . ."

"You might get more if you let it hang in the gallery for a few weeks, but I doubt it," he said. "And I wouldn't want to get a reputation for handling this kind of material." But then he conceded, "I'm not saying it isn't good."

"But if it's good, it *must* bring more."

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"Not so. Good isn't what sells . . . fashionable is what sells. We're talking about classical characters in idealized landscapes. Nature rearranged in the studio. Now, you tell me. How do I sell this little farm girl in a market like that?"

It was a good piece of work, I *knew* it; knew it with a greater confidence than I had ever brought to any work of my own. I said, "Are you telling me that this painting is at fault because there's too much of the truth in it?"

He shrugged delicately. "If you like. For what it's worth, I think your friend's very brave. But I can't sell his nerve, either . . . I just sell pictures."

What could I do? Antoine's tenure at the farm would last only as long as his ability to pay matched the greed of his landlords. The sum I'd been offered wouldn't buy him more than a few days' grace at current rates, but any effort to find a better price for the picture would take time. Even then, there were no guarantees of any greater success. With a sense of defeat, I accepted the offer.

There had to come a point, I'd decided, where Antoine would have to get his obsession into some kind of perspective. He'd found himself in a situation that had made a conceptual breakthrough possible, but now it was time to give some consideration to the strategy of his new career. After all, hadn't he already made his first commercial sale? And if I was beginning to sound like his father in this way of thinking, I didn't dwell on the fact long enough for it to bother me.

I went out again on the following Sunday. Antoine was waiting for me, on the wrong side of the river.

He was sitting on a rock by the crossing, staring into the fast-running current. If I'd been shocked by his appearance before, I was horrified now. He was filthy and wretched, his skin gray with ill health under its ingrained surface of dirt; his hair was like old straw, and his entire body was hunched and bent. I saw what looked like dried wounds on his hands, and when he looked up at my approach it was with the eyes of the starving.

For a moment I was unable to speak. To see a friend reduced so far, so fast! His bags, easel, and paints were beside him; they lay as if thrown there, the easel broken and the paints scattered and trampled into the riverside mud.

"Antoine!" I finally managed to say. "What happened here?"

"The money was gone, so they threw me out," he said simply. His voice was rough and weak. "I've been here for two days. When I tried to go back in, they set the dogs on me."

This, I assumed, would explain the wounds on his hands. "That's outrageous," I said. "I'm going to speak to them. Let them set the dogs

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on *me*, if they dare."

I stormed across the ford, not caring how much noise I made nor how much spray I created. Antoine, after rising unsteadily from his rock, hesitated for a while and then began to follow me at a distance.

The yard was in silence, and to me seemed just as grim as it had on that first day. Lise's mirror no longer hung under the chestnut tree, and from the dark stains on the ground I'd have guessed that the butchery hooks had been put to recent use. With Antoine still trailing along behind, I took a look in the barn; some of the hay had been carted out, but there was no sign of anyone around.

"We're too late," Antoine said, but I paid him no attention and went out through the back doors of the barn. Out here, at least, I found a sign of life in the form of the remains of a recent fire; it was smoking still, and as I drew closer I saw that the smoke actually came from a scattering of almost-extinct coals in the bottom of a shallow pit. They lay on a bed of deep ash, and there was more ash and hay mingled in with the earth that had been spaded out onto the ground beside the excavation. Even without extending my hand, I could feel the heat.

I was not to be stopped. Antoine started to speak again, but I didn't wait to listen; I was already on my way toward the stone house with its steeply pitched roof and its inch-thick doors, as stolid and as resistant to inquiry as I knew the people inside it to be. I strode across a kitchen garden where almost nothing grew, and hesitated at the side entrance; I could hear noises from inside, the sounds of a number of people together, and so without knocking I threw back the unbolted door before me and stepped through.

The noise ended as I entered, as sharply as if it had been cut by a blade. I saw a plain, whitewashed room with a broad table down its center, around which at least a dozen people sat; it seemed that the same face turned toward me in twelve or thirteen slightly differing forms, from a child of three to a woman so old and pale that she seemed bloodless. One of them, a man of around thirty years, was bibbed like a baby and being fed with a spoon. All of their eyes save his were on me; he continued to look eagerly at his plate.

I'd interrupted a feast, and a strange feast it was; on the table stood nothing but meat and dishes of liquid fat, and more of this in one spread than such a family might normally expect to see in a year. I saw joints and ribs and bones already picked clean, and at the far end of the table a plate piled high with roasted offal. This, I didn't doubt, was all the product of the cooking pit that I'd seen behind the barn. The sight and the smell made me queasy at the excess on display; the faces that now

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studied me blankly were bloated and smeared with grease.

Nobody spoke. But in my mind I heard that voice from days before: *Tell your friend, we can't eat his pictures.*

And then came something that terrified me, as if the hooks that held the backcloth of my world had suddenly slipped in their holes and allowed a corner to fall revealing the dark machinery that usually stood concealed. It happened as my gaze came to rest on one of the smaller serving dishes, runny with juices and melted fat. The joint that lay on it was charred around the edges, the skin scored and crisp; but for no more than a second it was recognizable, nails and all, as a human hand. I blinked and stared, and even as I did so the joint seemed to shimmer and to change, becoming indistinct for a moment before being restored to my sight in a less obvious form. I might have called it an illusion, but I knew that it was not; it was, I am certain, the final demise of Antoine's vision, crushed by the presence of the same poverty and ignorance and need that had given it birth.

The retarded thirty-year-old began to wail and to drum on the table with his fists, and I took three halting steps back and grabbed at the door handle to pull it closed on that terrible scene.

Antoine hadn't followed me to

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the house. He'd stayed back, and now waited at some distance. He seemed to be hugging himself, his left arm holding his right as if he was nursing some half-healed bruise. I went across to him and turned him and began to usher him out of the yard, and he complied without protest. On the other side of the river, we gathered up such of his things as were worth taking away; I gave him a few small pieces to carry, but the heaviest baggage I carried myself.

It was in this way that we walked down the lane, myself well laden and Antoine allowing himself to be hastened along. I couldn't take him onto the railway, not in a public compartment in his present state and condition, but there was enough money from the sale of the painting to be able to afford a horse and carriage to take us all of the way back to Paris. We would arrive late and in darkness, but that would be no disadvantage.

I spoke on the subject only once, as we left Corbeil after a half hour's rest. Antoine was huddled by the window, looking like a bundle of miserable sticks.

I said, "When you slept. Do you know where she went to?"

Antoine slowly turned his head so that his bleak eyes met mine. "I never wondered," he said.

And although I knew that he lied, I never asked him again.

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In his first story for F &SF, *Gus Funnell creates a future in which the fabric of nature has been torn asunder and those who people the world have returned to a medieval existence. A few of these can and do have a certain control over nature and find, in this primitive world, it sometimes necessary to exact "an eye for an eye."*

Trick

BY
AUGUSTINE FUNNELL

Although my father would have denied it bitterly, and called me clumsy and stupid and ungrateful, it was I who ran the Golden Bruin. True, he kept accounts in order and ale available, but he no longer seemed to care about the upkeep of the inn or its adjoining stable, entertainment, or any of the myriad details necessary for the success of an enterprise dedicated to serving the public. It was all left to me. But I was not Alanya, nor even dear departed Leija, so the lengths to which I went to preserve my father's business escaped his attention. Alanya, of course, with a simple dusting and a half hour's work in the tavern could bask in the warm glow of Father's approbation for days. Or once she could. Her sudden disappearance had hurt him more than even Leija's death, and he pined for her as though she *had* died. Everyone who frequented the inn knew she'd taken a fancy to a tall, muscular specimen who'd come by for a night's lodging and stayed almost a week, and it was generally acknowledged that she'd forsaken the rigors of life at the Golden Bruin for whatever pleasures he could give her. Father sent a couple of men in pursuit, but only one came back, and brought with him nothing more than a secondhand tale about a heartless rogue possessed of a way with the ladies, which drove Father deeper into his depression.

"She knew, Trick," Father told me drunkenly shortly after the report, "she *knew* how much I'd saved. For *her!* And she left anyway! Why?" But he had turned away without waiting for an answer, shaking his head and pondering the cruel vicissitudes of a life that had taken first his wife, then

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a daughter, and finally his most beloved daughter, and left him with only the sixteen-year-old adopted son of his wife's sluttish and long-dead sister. He seemed to think there was no justice in the universe. I would have agreed with him.

It began to look as though I might yet inherit the Golden Bruin and the hoard its lucrative operation had permitted Father to squirrel away.

It was quiet inside the Bruin, but tempestuous beyond. It was the kind of night that made travelers give thanks for sight of the inn's lights through the blizzard, but made the locals think twice before venturing out. Still, there were some in the tavern whose second thought had jibed with the first, and they sat around tables with pints of amber ale, trading lies about colder and more blustery winters, or trying to win a few coins at gamm or crib. I waited eagerly for such nights, because it meant some of the time ordinarily spent working could be spent poring over books I'd managed to accumulate by either outright purchase or trade — and even, sometimes, through the winning of a game of gamm from a guest. (Although Father frowned on this last, preferring that I *lose* to guests, regardless of what I could take from the locals.) Still, there *was* work to do, and from time to time I added wood to the fire, tended to the liquid refreshments of regulars brave enough to battle the blizzard, or cleaned ale mugs.

"Pretty quiet in here tonight," Karlin told me as I carried him his second pitcher of ale. "Used to be nobody minded the weather, 'cause the Bruin made the battle through it worthwhile."

I flashed the smile I kept reserved for complainers and simpletons, and set the pitcher in front of him. "Had a troupe all lined up," I told him, "but they said there wasn't enough snow and wind."

Karlin mumbled something I couldn't make out but that I took to be a distinct lack of appreciation for my jest, and stroked sparse red whiskers growing from pocked cheeks. Then, as he slid a couple of pieces of silver across the lacquered tabletop, he went on: "Heard the Red & Blue's got a minstrel of some sort. Maybe I shoulda gone there."

Karlin could have taken his custom *any*where and not have broken my heart. The fact that he'd come knowing the Bruin wasn't providing entertainment spoke more loudly than his complaints.

"Don't even have anybody worth lookin' at anymore," Karlin went on, and it was suddenly apparent he was feeling the effects of the first pitcher of ale, now drained. "Things ain't been the same since Alanya took flight."

It was a popular sentiment, had been for a year and a half, so I didn't

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waste my time arguing the point. Because in fact, things ***hadn't*** been the same. Alanya was a striking girl, with lustrous blonde hair suggesting the sun shone perpetually upon her, with pellucid eyes the color of June skies, and a smile that set the blood to throbbing in the veins of any man worthy of the description, and quite a few who weren't. Nor did the dirndl she wore to display to best effect the abundance of physical charms with which she'd been blessed cause any appreciable degree of disapproval from those same men. Customers bought ale, sometimes, for no other reason than to watch her bring it to their tables, to be blessed with that perfect smile that somehow managed an innocent eroticism they could never enjoy.

Something deeply personal must have shown on my face, for suddenly Karlin, misinterpreting, was making conciliatory noises, the first few words of which I missed. ". . . sayin' that she brightened up the place."

I smiled without malice. "She certainly did. But we can't worry about what happened yesterday."

He seemed relieved that I was holding no grudges tonight. "No sir. Get on with today, that's what I always say."

I pocketed his silver and left him, checking the other tables to be sure none of our dozen or so customers needed refills; they all seemed content. The Bruin's tavern could accommodate almost a hundred people, so it looked virtually deserted with so few. By the fireplace, two men dozed in a couple of more luxuriously upholstered armchairs, gradually shrinking puddles of melted snow around their boots. Their real reason for being here was not companionship and fine ale, but escape from mouthy spouses whose feminine curves were rolls of fat and sagging breasts, whose dulcet tones were strident shrieks and grating noises. Our dozers would sleep contentedly until we turned them out into the blizzard, then they'd stumble home and do battle, only to escape the next night and return. It wasn't much of a life, but they were comfortable with it.

"Trick!"

I turned to see who had called, and inside me something sagged. Still, as Father had told me a thousand times before he despaired of my ever learning it precisely the way he wished, a good innkeeper is not only attendant to the bidding of his patrons, he is immediately so. That did not mean I had to like it. I plastered a smile across my face and moved briskly to the table where Patriquin and Stef were engaged in a game of crib. A quick glance at the position of the pegs showed blue two points from game hole, with six points between the two blue pegs. In what was obviously Stef's hand, I counted eight

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points and I knew at once what the problem was.

"You play the odd hand of crib, don't you?" Patriquin asked, knowing full well I did since it was I who had taught him the game, damn my eyes. When I nodded, he went on, "What's your understanding of the muggins?"

"I say the points are in my hand, they're mine," Stef said, and his slurred speech reminded me he'd been in the Bruin since late afternoon. "But even if they ain't, they ain't *yours!*"

"You see the problem, Trick," Patriquin said calmly. "Could you settle it for us? Do I or do I not get his points if he misses 'em and I call muggins before he sees 'em?"

It was Patriquin who'd taught Stef to play, and I had no doubt he'd conveniently forgotten the muggins rule until such time as he needed it. Which, I saw from a quick count of his hand, was now, since he also needed precisely the two points from Stef's hand to reach game hole. *Somebody* wasn't going to be back to the Bruin for a couple of weeks no matter how I handled the problem. Patriquin was right, of course, but only because he hadn't been straight with Stef from the outset. I decided I'd miss him far less.

"Strickly speaking, yes, there is such a rule," I told them, "although among gentlemen it's considered niggardly to insist on it."

"*Take* the two mis'ble points, then!" Stef yelled, and tossed his cards across the table in Patriquin's general direction. "But ye ain't no gentleman, and it's worth the two coppers to be ridda ye!" He sent a couple of verdigrised disks after the cards, and in his haughtiest manner got to his feet and lurched across the tavern floor to another spot. He would be sure to make it known to anyone who would listen how greedily Patriquin had insisted on winning the game for copper-a-point stakes, and won the grand sum of two coppers. Patriquin's look was colder than the blizzard wind howling outside our windows and doors. I flashed him my most innocent smile and returned to the area behind the bar. He mumbled something about my name, but I was used to that, and nothing he could say in defeat could take the edge off my victory.

The lamps were full, the floors swept, and the tables supplied, so unless someone drained his pitcher in the next two minutes, my work was done for the time being. I settled in behind the bar and took up a book I had acquired from an overnight guest in payment of a gamm debt. The pages were old and yellow, the spine broken in too many places, and the covers cracked with age and misuse, but somehow it had held together so that no more than a quarter of the pages were missing. It was difficult to follow, even in places boasting a dozen or more successive pages, but with concentration and perseverance

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I began to get the general drift of what was happening. But many of the terms — what was a facist? a Russian? a Mauser? what in the world could *"Salud y cojones"* possibly mean? — were unfamiliar to me. In his long-ago time and his long-gone place, the writer with the peculiar name of Ernest Hemingway must have spent much of his life studying people, for things he said — even about people with whom I could not begin to identify or understand — could as easily be applied to Patriquin or Stef or Karlin, or even our two weary combatants dozing by the fire. What a glorious time to have lived, with an unlimited number of books available for the asking! Or so the scholars and teachers staying at the Golden Bruin had assured me, but their own knowledge was sketchy at best, so I placed no great store by it, even if I did listen attentively if they taught me other things.

I felt more than heard or saw my father's appearance, and when I marked my place and set the book quickly aside, I knew as my gaze met his that the storm beyond only barely out-raged the one in his heart. Still, I tried a hopeful smile.

"Patriquin tells me you insulted him in front of the other customers." He squinted, tendrils of red laced through the whites of his eyes, his three-day beard stubble making him look more like a Red & Blue patron than the owner of the Golden Bruin. Hard lines slashed through the ruddy cheeks of a face I remembered as stronger, more tolerant. It was a face as far in the past as Hemingway, as hard to take as the Shift betwen Old Time and now.

"He makes it sound like a common thing," I said in my defense, standing even at full height, several inches shorter than Father, "but it was once, and he brought it on himself by misleading Stef about the rules of crib. Stef was the only one there."

"He says you poked fun at him when he asked about the rules."

"He's lying. Just trying to get back at me for not helping him cheat Stef."

For a long moment my father towered over me, breathing heavily, and I steeled myself for the next in a series of blows that had begun shortly after Alanya's disappearance. The smell of our brew was on his breath, but that was nothing new. He swayed almost imperceptibly, then seemed to forget just what the topic of conversation had been. Perhaps because it had been the vastly unpopular Patriquin and not one of Father's cronies I had insulted, my transgression would escape his punishment; perhaps he was just too tired to slap me around tonight; perhaps the ache for Alanya was too sharp for extended concentration elsewhere. In any event, he turned his gaze to the book beneath the bar top, and his squint narrowed further.

"I told you before, I don't want you reading when you're supposed to be working!"

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I nodded. As I always did. On an earlier occasion I had pointed out how I'd already completed what work there was and should be able to spend the rest of the time doing what I chose, but the words had barely escaped my lips before I found myself on the floor, a ringing in my ears and water in my eyes. So I nodded. As I always did.

He opened his mouth to complain about something else, but before the words got out, the front door opened in a crash of wood and roar of wind, and someone in a black cloak whipped wildly by the gale hurried through, then struggled to close the door. The brief blast of frigid air made everyone but the two sleepers, oblivious to anything not uxorially strident, shiver momentarily. Then, brushing snow off his cloak and stamping his boots on the three-thick bearskin mats by the door, the newcomer surveyed the room with appraising eyes beneath the bushiest, blackest eyebrows I'd ever seen, fixing finally on my father and me behind the bar. It seemed as propitious an interruption as I was liable to get. I edged quickly around Father and hurried to the stranger, smiling as I always did, but with something more than the innkeeper's usual pleasure at seeing money walk through the door. The chances were good that Father would forget all about Patriquin.

"Welcome to the Golden Bruin! We boast a roaring fire, cold ale and steaming coffee, and the most comfortable beds anywhere!"

It usually brought at least a nod of acknowledgement or a smile for my enthusiasm, but there was no such response this time. Momentarily taken off guard, I stood idiotically for several seconds before reaching for his rucksack, but he pulled it slowly out of my reach and fixed me with a cool gaze. His dark eyes glittered wildly for a moment before he got himself under control.

"Damn cold storm," he said in a gravelly voice. "Glad to be out of it." He smiled, but it seemed forced. "I'll need lodging for the night."

That, at least, was as expected, so I returned the smile. "Certainly. Right over here." I led him to the counter, where Father had not moved, and over the next two or three minutes I assigned him a room, collected the money, and learned that his name was Klute. He was from Montra, and upon hearing the name, I made allowances for his peculiar behavior at the outset. Even we in the hinterlands knew dark tales of oddness and worse originating in that depraved city. Still, Klute's silver was pure, though it seemed to leave his hands with reluctance as that strange glitter danced once more through his eyes, and we accepted him as a guest without any more than the usual trepidation. He had a mount that he'd left secured outside, and he seemed to remember it only as an afterthought,

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asking as he ascended the stairs to his room if we had facilities for horses. When he disappeared at the landing, I saw everyone in the tavern staring after him, and I couldn't suppress a smile. There had been complete silence during our dealings; even Father had watched quietly as Klute scrawled his name in an unsteady hand in our guest ledger. As I was reaching for my loden jacket, a low murmur went up from those whose games and drinking had ceased, and by the time I was at the tavern door and bundled to face the elements, I could hear snippets of varied speculations.

Klute's mount was a pathetic beast I marveled had been able to carry him at all, let alone through this treacherous storm. It followed docilely when I unhitched it and started toward the stable, and once inside stood calmly while I lit a lantern. It clopped into the stall I directed it to, eyed me mournfully as I removed its bit and bridle, then turned its head to follow my movements as I went back to unfasten the crupper. When I had taken the dilapidated old saddle off its back, it seemed to sigh with an unlimited weariness; and while I gave it a quick curry and rubbed its tired, spavined rear legs, it chewed contentedly on a quarter bundle of hay. When I was finished, I stared into its deep and liquid eyes a long time, and it sighed as though recognizing an old friend. After that, I couldn't help going to the oat bin and scooping out a quarter bucketful to offer as a treat. The sorry old beast snorted, scattering dust in a chaotic cloud, and attacked joyfully. When I entered the storm again, I left its water trough full, and an extra quarter bundle of hay. If they resented it, the horses of our other two guests didn't complain.

If anything, the wind had picked up, and I was glad to be back inside the Golden Bruin. Father had gone —presumably to the kitchen, where he spent most of his time sitting with generous portions of ale — leaving the customers to fend for themselves. Since they were, after all, regulars, and each would keep an eye on the others, they'd waited impatiently for my return; I had several calls for refills before I even had my coat off. Ordinarily I would have hustled to it right away, but something on the mat before the counter caught firelight and gleamed brightly, drawing me as flame draws a bug. I stooped to pick it up, and my heart went very cold very quickly. Inside a transparent globe an inch and a half in diameter, filled with a clear liquid whose properties I could not begin to imagine, was an eye. A perfect human eye, with an iris as blue as a cloudless June sky. The globe hung from a delicate silver chain, and as I stared at it, feeble light from flickering lamps gave the impression *it* was staring at *me!* When I turned the thing slowly in my hand, the pupil remained fixed on

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mine. A trick of the fluid, no doubt.

Karlin's hoarse call for ale finally attracted my attention. I jammed the globe into my vest's side pocket and hurried to tend to business. But my mind was not on the pitchers of amber fluid I deposited at three different tables. Even when Patriquin fixed me with a smug gaze, having seen if not heard the exchange between Father and me, I failed to see the gaze for what it was, and grinned back automatically, no doubt puzzling him considerably.

The thing any honest innkeeper would have done was ask Klute if he'd lost the globe, and if so, return it. And if it had been anything but that pellucid orb, I would have done precisely that. Instead, once I had attended our customers' needs, I scurried into the alcove that served as my sleeping space behind the counter, lit a candle, and withdrew the globe to look at it long and hard. It was precisely as I remembered, though in the dim light it seemed almost iridescent. No matter which way I turned the globe, the jet black pupil always stared back at me; if I turned the globe quickly, it might take a second or two for the orb to turn, but turn it did until we regarded each other in what seemed to me to be mutual amusement. Some elemental had encased the eye, I was certain of it. Only one versed in manipulation of the rent laws of nature caused by the Shift could possibly have accomplished such a thing. The globe fairly oozed elemental emanations.

I found a picture of Leija in my brain. Gentle, frail Leija, who suffered some peculiar malady for which local doctors (and one elderly one from a far city, staying a night at the Bruin on his journey home to die) had prescribed a variety of herbs and potions, all of which were foul-smelling and tasted of evil. Or so Leija described them. Her condition had been known from the time she was as young as six; what wasn't known was just how far she could get first. Accepting she was as good as dead, she didn't have the usual worries of growing children, and as a result she lacked such things as greed, jealousy, and pettiness. She was a tiny, delicate, dying thing, and I loved her. "Poor, misplayed Trick," she called me when she was sixteen and two months from a death so different from the one she'd faced for so long. I think she genuinely liked me. She got me a book, once.

As suddenly as her image had come, it was gone, and the eye and I were again staring at each other. But I no longer felt amused, and even though I knew it wasn't possible, I thought I saw the look of a trapped dog waiting for its oppressor to rip out its throat.

It was suddenly important that I return that globe and its ghastly contents to Klute, so I jammed the thing in my pocket, extinguished the can-

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dle, and walked from the alcove as if I'd had a perfectly good reason for being there during tavern hours. Either no one had noticed my absence or no one cared, for even when I started up the stairs, none of our customers paid me any particular attention.

The hallway lamps cast only dull illumination, something I had never noticed before. In my pocket the globe seemed to throb against my chest, and I shivered despite the fact there was no draft in the hallway.

Klute answered my knock at once. He hadn't lighted candles or lamp, and his ebony outline was a menacing thing in the shadows from which he loomed. I had the unmistakable feeling he knew why I was there, but he wasn't going to make it easy for me.

"I found this in front of the counter," I told him, drawing the silver chain slowly from my pocket until the globe dangled between us, silent and mesmerizing. The pupil's focus was apparently entirely on Klute, since I could see nothing of it. "Is it yours?"

He reached out a thick hand and closed his fingers around the globe. "Yes." When his gaze met mine, I saw the same thing I'd seen earlier, something bright and alive and sparkling, but dying, too. It so paralleled what I thought I saw in the globed eye, that had Klute been more lightly complected, I would have sworn all three eyes were from the same head. But I knew differently, and would have even if Klute hadn't been possessed of eyes in which there was no discernible difference between iris and pupil.

When I asked, "Is the room satisfactory?" it was from nervousness and embarrassment, not any concern for his comfort, and I think he knew it. He didn't answer right away, but kept his unflinching gaze on mine until it was mine that wavered and sought the floor.

"Yes," he said for the second time, and it was a sibilant whisper that died almost at once.

I turned to go and mumbled something I hoped sounded polite, but before I'd taken a step I felt his hand on my shoulder. For one heartbeat I considered headlong flight down the corridor; then I regained control of myself and turned to face him, attempting a smile that wouldn't come.

"I want something to eat," he said, and vast amusement rippled through his eyes at my visible relief. "As long as it's hot." With that he retreated into the darkness and firmly shut the door.

The hallway didn't seem so dark as I walked it again, and by the time I reached the landing, most of the dread that had filled me at Klute's touch had drained away. Even so, I was glad to descend to the tavern, where people with eyes that didn't resemble the space between stars turned disinterestedly toward me.

In the kitchen I bustled about the

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center counter so Father wouldn't have reason to tell me to hurry. I cut thick slabs of roast beef and heated them in our stone oven, then toasted generous slices of fresh bread, but I did it all automatically, for my mind was concerned with the eye in the globe. And while I would have liked very much to tell Father about it, I did not. Could not. For even if he decided not to beat me for my cruel insolence, he still wouldn't believe that the pellucid eye the hue of a cloudless June morning was that of the beautiful and mourned Alanya.

Father was drunk; he was very drunk. He watched me through hooded eyes, and his face set into increasingly harder lines the longer I was there. When he drained a mug of ale and set it down hard on the large chopping block where he always sat, I knew some of that hardness was transferring itself to his mouth.

"Trick," he said contemptuously, and I knew what was coming. "That ain't your real name, *is* it, boy?"

As quickly as I could, I spread generous dollops of butter over the warm bread.

"Your *real* name's Simmer, but it don't tell the whole story! You know what tells the *whole* story? Trick! *That's* what pegs you. Trick! Just one more your slut mother turned in some stinkin' drug den in Montra! You know that, boy?"

I knew it. He'd told me enough times. I couldn't have sliced thick wedges of cheese from the block any faster if I'd tried. But I tried anyway.

"Oh, Magla didn't like it none, you bein' her sister's boy and all, but it was *me* puttin' food in your bastard mouth, and *me* trainin' you proper so you'd have somethin' to take with you into the world. So I told her you was gonna be Trick, and you was."

I certainly was. And every barhound piece of scum who'd ever heard the story had reminded me of it, too.

"But y'know, could be I'm your old man! Your slut mother couldn't even keep her hands off her own sister's husband! Usta drag me out to the stable every time she come to visit, then she'd hustle on down to the Red & Blue for a bit. Couldn't get enough! But she never charged me a copper, not once!" He laughed harshly, and I knew the familiar punchline. "So maybe if you're mine, I shoulda called you Freebie!"

I was ready to leave with Klute's sandwiches, but Father's jest about my origins had driven him deeper into his foul mood. He lurched off the stool by the chopping block and, quicker that I'd thought him able, was beside me, his thick fingers poking tunnels into my shoulders. His breath was foul, the whites of his eyes almost crimson, and the stink of days-old sweat was thick about him.

"You filthy little bastard!" he hissed. "You ain't a tenth as good as my Alanya, but I *lose* her and get *you!*"

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He slapped me hard, and I dropped to the floor as if he'd taken off my head. I'd had the foresight to put the sandwich plate down first, and saved myself an extra beating for wasting good food. He towered over me, fists clenched and purple veins throbbing in a face contorted with rage at the injustices of the universe. He kicked me, but it was restrained, as if he couldn't quite bring himself to finish the job. Yet. He lurched back to the chopping block, filled his mug, and drank deeply, facing the wall so he wouldn't have to look at me. I knew enough to be quiet as I struggled to my feet, retrieved the sandwiches, and left.

I have one memory of my mother. We're standing on a grassy hillside, on the warmest day I ever knew, with the sun a fiery ball just for us. A gentle wind blows fine strands of auburn hair back from her shoulders. She's smiling, talking to me about elementals and clouds, holding my tiny hand in one of hers, and carrying a picnic basket in the other. I don't remember the meal except for the surprise she promised me all day; it turned out to be two thick chunks of vanilla fudge, a candy for which I have yet to lose my fondness. When I had finished them — sharing the second with her — I was too tired to walk home, so she carried both the picnic basket and me, and the final thing I remember is falling slowly and warmly asleep in her arms. She was dead when I woke up. My slut mother.

We had three fewer customers when I made my way through the barroom to the stairs, and I was glad to see two of the missing were Patriquin and Karlin. Since the wind still shrieked outside, I doubted the others would be leaving much before they had to.

When I knocked at Klute's door, I expected him to open as quickly as he had before, but it was a long time until he turned the doorknob. He'd made use of the lamp, although the wick was short and the light faint, and shadows in the room danced eerily as he stood back to let me enter. I placed the tray on the small table beside the bed and turned to leave, but he had closed the door and stood before it with crossed arms, a sentry around whom I could not hope to pass.

"A few words with you, boy," he said softly, and I had to strain to hear.

"I can't stay long. No one's tending the tavern."

He dismissed our patrons with a quick wave of his arm and a contemptuous, "They'll wait," then moved to the bed. He sat, reached for a sandwich, and took a mouthful so large I was certain he would choke. He indicated the room's only chair, and although I wanted nothing more than to leap for the door and flee, I sat as I was bidden. Klute made virtually no noise as he chewed and swallowed that first enormous bite. His eyes,

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alive and sparkling, held me motionless, and they never left mine.

He had finished the first sandwich and picked up the second before he said, "You know about the eye."

I tried to keep my face expressionless, but I couldn't. Something frantic bubbled out of my brain and spread itself in plain view; he smiled, his eyes narrowed, and he started in on the second sandwich. I hoped it would still be warm enough.

The wind whistled around the windows, ominous in the dread silence between us. In those sparkling eyes that never left mine, I saw a thousand things, not one of which stayed long enough for me to be sure I saw it in the first place. The longer the silence endured, the greater my trepidation became. Klute could be a thief, a murderer, an assassin on the run. Or he could be one of those who'd learned to control elemental forces revealed by the Shift, that cataclysm the scholars told me had brought strange and dark abilities out of some precious few, but doomed the blood of millions more into tens of generations.

When Klute finished the final bite, he reached into the rucksack beside his feet, withdrew a metal flask, and drank long of something with an acrid aroma so strong I could smell it from where I sat. It was nothing the Golden Bruin had ever sold.

"You know about the eye," Klute said again, holding the flask at an angle so fumes from it wafted in my direction. His throat must have been made of iron.

"It's my sister's," I told him, for there seemed no point in denying it now. "Alanya's."

He nodded, but I wasn't sure he was acknowledging my words; his eyes remained focused on mine, but the sparkle in them seemed to dim any real sight he might have. His breathing was irregular, and his hard smile built pillars of terror in my mind. For half a minute he regarded me in that fashion, then, slowly, some semblance of normality struggled through the madness and I felt, if not safe, at least no longer in immediate peril.

"Yes," he said sibilantly, "it's hers." He withdrew the chain slowly from a small compartment of the rucksack, and when the globe swung free, he held it up so it caught the lamplight. He stared at it for a few seconds, then enclosed the whole thing in his other hand and rested his fist on his thigh.

"She told me you and your father don't get along," he said without the madness of a moment before. "She said you'd help."

"With what?"

"With finding the money, boy! Your sister claims your father's got a fortune stashed away."

I was puzzled. "If she wants it, all she has to do is ask for it; Father would do anything to have her back."

Klute looked at me with amuse-

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ment; then a deep laugh echoed briefly above the wind. "Maybe he would, but not in her present condition he wouldn't! And her condition ain't gonna improve any."

"That's meaningless," I said, irritated with his abstruseness. Immediately the words were out of my mouth, I regretted them, for something hard flickered through Klute's eyes. He must have seen my regret, for after a moment the hardness softened slightly.

"It's like this, boy: your sister's a duster. You know what that is? No, I don't suppose you do, out here. She's addicted to glitterdust, hooked tighter'n a four-inch peg in a three-inch hole. Takes about three snorts to get addicted, and there's only two cures. First is eye removal, second's death, and all addicts die in less than five years. She don't get dust on a regular basis, she dies sooner. That takes about two weeks; she'll ache every second, and every second the pain'll double. I've seen some scream for almost five minutes without taking a breath, just go till there's no sound anymore and their faces turn blue and their eyes bulge out like a bullfrog's. Then they get a breath and it starts all over again." He smiled at the memory. "But I don't give 'em what they need till they pay me. Never." He opened his palm and looked at Alanya's eye, then swung the globe so I could see it again. It arced almost languidly, mesmerizing me once again. It really was Alanya's eye. I'd known it, but confirmation made it immutable. Klute had probably enlisted the aid of an elemental to encase it for safekeeping. When I finally managed to wrench my gaze from it, I saw in Klute something ignorance had kept me from seeing earlier: he was no less addicted than Alanya, I wondered what it was he kept for himself if he sold her something she couldn't live without.

"So that's it, boy. You help me find your old man's hoard, your sister gets enough dust to keep her razor-sharp and happy till she dies. You don't, she dies a thousand times after what she's got now runs out, and she dies in agony every time." The globe swung back and forth, back and forth, coruscating briefly each time before passing beyond the lamplight.

Dying or not, addicted or not, I still didn't see why Alanya wouldn't come home and ask for the money herself. I knew just the sight of her would loosen Father's heart- and purse strings. I said so.

Kulte's laugh was contemptuous of my ignorance, and I felt my face redden with anger and embarrassment. "How long has she been gone?"

"Year and a half."

"Year and a half," He shook his head. "Let me tell you about the beautiful Alanya, boy." He lowered the globe, looked at it a moment, then slipped it back into the compartment of the rucksack from which

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he'd taken it. "The pretty boy she left with just needed someone for company on chilly nights, and she fit the bill. When they got to Montra, he took everything she had worth taking, pointed her toward the city, and rode off. She had nothing, nowhere to go, no one to talk to. But a pretty girl like that, it don't take long before someone suggests a way for her to make a few silvers, and if she's good at what she does, why, she makes a lot of them. Alanya made a lot of silvers. And when beautiful women have lots of money, they look for interesting ways to spend it. She was still new to Montra; thought it was all shine and glitter. Why, I don't think she saw the mutants even when they was dying in front of her, or the dusters scrawny as starving snakes, neither! All she saw was money and good times, and all she looked for was a way to spend one on the other." A faraway look momentarily replaced the glitter in his eyes. "I gave her a way. Dust makes you see things . . . gives you a sense of *power!* She couldn't get enough. Snorted it like she was eating candy. Then the money ran out, but the need didn't." His smile was hard, and the glitter returned. "Oh, there was still enough of the good-looking woman about her that I didn't mind trading a little dust for a quick snuggle, but when her hair started going grey and her skin looked like ashes, when she wasn't any bigger around than a pole and her teeth started bleeding, there wasn't much about her that interested me anymore. She begged and cried and promised she'd do a lot of things if I'd just give her a little dust, but boy, I'm in business to make money. When she finally got that through her head, why, she told me everything I needed to know about the Golden Bruin. I couldn't be sure she was lying, so I offered a trade: an eye for enough dust to last until I got back. See, dust is made from the powered eyes of users . . . you dry 'em, crush 'em to powder and add dilutants, then feed the powder back into the cycle. I told Alanya that if I got back with what she said was here, she'd get enough dust to last until the damned stuff took her straight through the nightmare!" He chuckled. "You shoulda seen her run lookin' for my scoop so I could take the eye! Boy, you shoulda *seen* her! No, your old man wouldn't take her back or give her money, or even admit she's his daughter! Not now. One look at her and he'd puke! She knows it, too." He regarded me through half-lidded eyes appraising my reaction, and apparently approved of what he saw. "I know you believe me, but the question is, will you help me? Will you help Alanya?"

I thought of half a dozen things at once, some connected, some not. Fifty times or more I'd promised myself I was leaving — with my skills I could indenture myself *some*where — but

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not once had I considered robbing Father to facilitate the escape. I thought of Alanya as I remembered her, then contrasted that with the hag Klute insisted she'd become. I thought of the agony she'd suffer in a two-week span that would seem eternal, and I couldn't suppress a shudder. I thought of her eventual death, but only after the life left to her was filled with whatever limited glory the horror of glitterdust could give. And finally I thought of Leija, who had genuinely liked me, and who was dead.

"I don't know where he keeps it," I heard myself saying.

"Didn't think you would," Klute said through a smile as wide as his face. "But you can show me around; show me where your old man sleeps and where he keeps his business documents."

"When?"

"Couple hours after you close . . . give everything a chance to settle down."

I nodded and got up to leave.

"Just remember, boy, if you try anything cute, your sister won't live through the winter. And by the time she dies, she'll wish she'd never been born."

I nodded my understanding, and moved past the end of the bed toward the door. I could almost feel the gelid gaze of the eye in the globe, slicing through the rough fabric of Klute's rucksack and into my spine, and my shiver had nothing to do with the fact Klute hadn't made use of the fireplace and his room was frigid.

In the hallway I took only a couple of steps before I had to stop and rest against the wall to let my heart cease pounding. When I closed my eyes, I found in my mind a crystal-clear image of Alanya's eye, and I shivered again. Somewhere, perhaps this very instant, she was thinking of me helping Klute, was counting on it for whatever glitterdust gave her. Well, she was going to get what she wanted. I had every intention of helping Klute find Father's stash.

Every business day, a twelve-hour candle was lit at the hour we opened —noon — and when it had burned entirely and sputtered out, we closed. When I descended to the tavern and saw there was still an hour or more to wait, I knew it would be the longest hour of the year. I was right. Everyone was well supplied, and if anyone was hungry, he was waiting until he got home to assuage the pangs. I tried reading, but the words blurred and my mind wandered so that I absorbed nothing of the trials of Hemingway's Robert Jordan. Finally, in disgust, I gave up on the book and uncharacteristically tossed it roughly beneath the counter. When I glanced at the time candle burning in full view of everyone, I wasn't in the slightest surprised to see that almost three-quarters of an hour remained.

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It seemed that the wind was gradually dying down, although it could have been nothing more than a temporary lull in the elemental violence. I hoped it wasn't. I found my thoughts turning to Klute's horse, and I was glad I'd given it the oats and extra hay. If it had to go back out when Klute got what he'd come for, it would need its strength.

When the candle finally died, I brought the fact to the attention of our patrons. They began to straggle out, old Stef still complaining to a companion about Patriquin's "niggardly ways in a gentleman's game." It took no more than a casual shake of the shoulders to wake our dozers — their internal clocks were well synchronized with the hours of the Golden Bruin — and each got to his feet, stretching and yawning and steeling himself for battle.

Finally the place was empty. I locked the doors, checked to be sure the window latches were secure, and one by one extinguished the lamps; at the bottom of the stairs, I closed and latched the iron bar door in case one of our other guests had developed larcenous tendencies. I removed the evening's take from the cash drawer, put it all into a leather pouch, and steeled myself to take it to Father. Unless he had gone to bed while I was upstairs with Klute, he was still in the kitchen, drinking.

Nor surprisingly, he was still in the kitchen, drinking. The lamps were turned low and the cooking fires out, and for a moment looking at him I was struck with pity. It vanished when he turned from the chopping block and hard lines deepened in his face. I held up the pouch.

"Just bringing you the night's take before I go to bed." I went toward him as casually as my racing heart would permit, set the pouch on the block, and backed away. He regarded me through serous eyes, and I wasn't entirely sure he saw me. When he turned his gaze to the pouch, I said, "Good night, Father," turned, and left as quickly as I could without breaking into a trot.

My alcove was on the other side of the kitchen walls, so I knew I'd hear when Father got up to hide whatever portion of the revenues he added to his stash. If I was careful, I could follow him once he left the kitchen and get, if not its precise location, at least a general idea of its whereabouts. A sudden burst of excitement made my heart skip a beat, and I wondered if Alanya was thinking of me at this very moment.

In the alcove I stretched out on the doormats that Father had deemed no longer good enough for customers to stamp their feet on. They were still thick, certainly warm enough, and after repeated airings had hardly an odor at all.

I waited.

Eventually I heard the clink of coins emptied onto the chopping

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block, then lighter clinks as they were sorted and counted. It was as mesmerizing in its way as the pendulum swing of the globe, and as it went slowly on and on I realized Father must be counting the money over and over again, for the take hadn't been that high. Very well, I could wait.

Leija's image came unbidden to my mind; as blonde as Alanya, with eyes as blue, but her honest smile lacked Alanya's innocent eroticism. And always in her face the awareness of tragedy, the unavoidable destiny of death at a tender age. So frail, so gentle, and she liked me.

The bitterness welled up then, and I was unable to stem it. I let images I had kept hidden in my subconscious begin to purl their way through my brain, and I faced them squarely for the first time since Leija's death.

Summer. Alanya and one of her beaux strolling casually toward the stable while I mend broken shutters and rotting sills at the Golden Bruin. Ten minutes. Twenty. Hot sun. Leija appearing, in pain this particular day but trying to hide it, stopping to chat for a moment and compliment my workmanship. A garland of purple flowers over her left ear. The high nicker of a guest's horse, and Leija deciding to curry the beast, leaving. Whistling some inane tune picked up from a guest. Half a minute. Father appearing in the doorway, asking for Alanya, dispatching me to collect her. The courtyard. Inside the stable, pleasant smells of hay and oats and horses, even dung. Familiar sights, stalls, bundles of hay, oat bins, shafts of sunlight through chinks between the boards. Alanya standing over Leija, her beau beside her. Blood soaking Leija's fine blonde hair. Alanya with wild hair, half a dozen pieces of dirty-gold hay in it. Turning, seeing me.

"Leija fell out of the hayloft, Trick! Run quick! Get Father!"

Advancing. Leija's inert form, her skull split, the blood. Crushed purple flowers. Alanya's hands, one on either shoulder, digging into me like spikes.

"She fell, Trick. She fell out of the hayloft. Do you understand?"

Nodding. Out into blazing sunlight. Running full tilt, a sudden jab of pain behind the eyes. Father, hearing me yell even though I didn't know I was, appearing in the doorway of the Golden Bruin.

"Leija's dead!"

Father racing across the courtyard to the stable. Following. Alanya crying, hay gone from a head boasting every hair in place. Her beau uselessly beside her, looking afraid. Very, very afraid. Father halting beside his lifeless daughter. Staring disbelievingly.

"She fell!" Alanya through a river of tears. "Out of the hayloft." A trembling hand pointing toward the guilty loft.

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"You killed her!" Blurting it out, knowing in my heart's core it is so.

Slap. A fist. Ground pounding my face. Gasping for breath. Pink haze over eyes. Through it, Father carrying Leija's limp form into the sunlight. Alanya's beau following. Alanya bending over me, fingernails digging more holes, this time into my forearm.

"Leija fell, Trick! She fell out of the hayloft!" *Hissing, like a snake.*

All alone. Lying in the dirt, catching breath, tendrils of hurt shooting through chest and face. After a long time, on my feet. Balance. Hurt. Toward the hayloft, each ladder rung separated by a mile. In the hayloft. More familiar, friendly smells. Knowing there's death here. Looking beneath a bundle of hay. A hammer. One violet petal crushed against its rounded head, moist crimson gradually drying to rusty orange. A single blonde hair.

The images dissipated suddenly, and I found I was staring through tears at the darkness above me. At that instant I realized there was no longer the clink of one coin against another in the kitchen. I brushed tears from my eyes, furious with myself for getting caught in the emotional trap, and listened for sounds. Unless I was greatly mistaken, Father was leaving the kitchen. I crawled to the hanging blanket that separated my alcove from the counter area and beyond, and peeked through the space between blanket edge and doorframe. When Father appeared, I could see him clearly. He carried nothing but the empty beer mug, which he slapped on the counter before weaving toward his bedroom farther down the back wall. I heard him fumble with keys and curse softly, then finally there was the sound of the door opening and closing. Silence. I remained where I was, disappointment welling up inside me. Father was so drunk he'd forgotten the pouch in the kitchen! He hadn't added anything to Alanya's horde, which meant either Klute would be in the Bruin another night, or he'd leave with nothing. There didn't seem to be any question which it would be.

I left the alcove, a residue of hurt lingering in my mind from the memory of Leija's death. I might as well extinguish the lamps and get the pouch for safekeeping; otherwise Father would be certain to accuse me of carelessness in the morning, and the day would get off on a sour note.

The pouch wasn't on the chopping block. Nor, when I checked the counter and lockers and cupboards, was it in any of those places. But Father hadn't carried it, and he hadn't been wearing anything with pockets large enough to hold it. So he'd left it behind.

Excitement swelled through me suddenly: his horde was here, in the kitchen! He'd put the entire take with

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it, motivated, perhaps, by his sense of loss and depth of despair this particular night. But where?

I was on the verge of initiating a search when I heard a metallic noise from the tavern. My heart seemed to stop for at least a half dozen beats, and an image of Father, drunk and enraged, slithered through my mind. When the noise came again, I breathed with relief and hurried out of the kitchen.

Klute was waiting at the iron bars, suspicious and cold. When I unlatched the door to let him out, he brushed past me harder than necessary, and I moved away in case he intended violence. But he understood the need for quiet, and when I led him toward the kitchen, he followed without a sound.

"It's in here," I told him when we were in the kitchen again. "I brought him the night's take, and he just went to bed without it."

"Your room's on the other side of this wall, but you didn't hear anything?" Klute's suspicions registered clearly on his face. He grabbed me suddenly, spun me around, and clamped one large hand over my mouth. Then he pressed the forefinger of the other hand directly against my left eye, his nail jabbing into my tear duct. I hadn't even had time to close my eyelid, and the pain was intense. I clawed at his hand, but he didn't even feel it.

"Hurts, don't it, boy?" he hissed into my ear. "Just remember two things: one, you try to cross me now, I'll gouge out both eyes quicker'n shit through a goose; and two, this ain't nothin' at all compared to what your sister'll go through a couple million times a day if she don't get what she needs."

I struggled in his grasp, but there was no hope of escape. When he pressed the finger a little harder against my eye, vivid flashes of crimson shot through my skull and I thought my head would explode. The strength left my legs, and I began to sag. He dropped me then and nudged me with the toe of a thick-soled boot.

"You understand what you just heard, boy?"

Through what seemed an ocean over my eyes, I looked up at him looming above me. I whispered, "Yes," and waited for the pain in my head to go away. After a minute or two, I realized no permanent damage had been done, and I got to my feet. The dustdealer had already begun to search, starting in the corner where the cupboards began, and working his way gradually along that wall. I didn't say anything, but I knew Father's stash wasn't there; I worked in this kitchen, I was searching those cupboards for a pot or pan or seasoning fifty times a day. I was reasonably certain I would have noticed anything that looked like twenty years of savings! I made it appear as though I were searching the floor around the

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center counter for something resembling a trapdoor (again, something I'd have know about), while I gave the matter some thought.

It required precious little.

"Klute!"

He turned, and when I indicated the chopping block, he came toward it warily. The block was four feet high, easily that long, and two feet wide, shoved against the wall so it was accessible but out of the way. There would be a lot of room inside if it was hollow.

We moved it out from the wall, and I was not in the slightest surprised to discover there were casters cut up into it so that it slid effortlessly, yet looked like the immovable chunk of wood it was supposed to be. Klute's eyes glittered when he saw the hinged door at the back, and I noticed that his hand shook ever so slightly as he reached to unlatch it.

Atop the pile of gold and silver coins that reflected the lamplight sat the leather pouch I had left with Father. There was far more gold than silver, and unless the hollow space was much smaller than it appeared, Klute's exhausted equine could never carry it.

"Is there a back door to the stable?" he asked me.

There was, and as I left the kitchen to get my loden jacket from behind the counter, Klute seemed very pleased with himself. He slid by me in the darkness, ascending the stairs like a silent shadow. I waited for him, and when he came down with his cloak and rucksack, I latched the iron bar door, and we stole quietly back to the kitchen. Klute began removing the money while I slipped out the back exit and struggled through the snowdrifts toward the stable. The night was cold, but the snow had stopped. Even the wind seemed to be dying. It took a minute, but I finally got the door partially ajar, and I slipped through the open space gratefully. Klute hadn't mentioned anything about saddlebags, but since he'd obviously need something, I got mine and Father's from pegs near the door, and took them back to the kitchen.

"Smart boy," Klute said, and condescendingly flipped one of the gold coins in my direction. I caught it, admired its gleam in the deficient light, then slipped it into my vest.

He'd worked fast, and with one more handful emptied the chopping block. He thrust a candle inside to be sure he hadn't missed anything, then began grabbing handfuls of coins and jamming them into the saddlebags. I knelt and helped him, all the while terrified that the faint noise of one coin clinking against another would be enough to wake Father.

It took more than a quarter of an hour, but we filled the saddlebags and his rucksack. Klute wrapped his cloak about his shoulders, and in two trips we carried Father's fortune into the barn. I was very careful to extin-

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guish the lamps and lock the rear door.

"This is my night, boy," Klute told me as he saddled his horse, then attached his rucksack so the weight was evenly distributed. "First I get the money, then the storm stops, and now I've got two more horses to help carry the load."

I made as if to protest, but something in his glittering eyes stopped me cold. While I distributed the weight evenly over the two other horses, Klute withdrew something from his rucksack. A shaft of moonlight through a crack near the top of the barn showed me the metal container he held. He opened it, and extracted a small lump of something that glowed pale green in the darkness. It was no larger than a fingernail, but it seemed to weigh heavily in Klute's big hands. He held the lump under his nostrils, squeezed, and inhaled viciously as a brilliant turquoise liquid squirted out. For an instant the liquid stuck to his upper lip; then as if of its own volition it disappeared with quick undulations into his nostril. For a moment Klute seemed to lose his balance, but he caught himself before falling to the dirt and hay. He stared about wildly, then focused on me, madness pirouetting through his sparkling eyes.

"That was alive," I said, and I took a step backward.

Klute grinned the grin of lunacy and held out the container. Perhaps two dozen pale green lumps glowed dully. "They all are," he said. "Habstools. Burrow as far as they can; live all of five seconds. But kid, the things they secrete as they die can make ten minutes worth a lifetime." He extended the container further, but I saw only a minor variation on the horror that owned Alanya, and I took another step backward. Klute laughed, snapped shut the lid, and tossed the empty habstool integument carelessly into the hay.

"You helped two people tonight, boy," Klute said as he leaned on his mount. "Me, and your precious little Alanya. I guess that's a full night's work."

"Not quite," I told him, moving forward the two steps I'd yielded. I felt very good doing it.

Klute glared menacingly, but it meant nothing to me now. I approached him with contemptuous nonchalance and unfastened the flap of the rucksack compartment in which he kept the globe. Thinking he understood, Klute laughed.

"Sure, take the eye," he said generously. "Few silvers would buy the dust in it anyway."

I removed the globe, snapped my fingers in a theatrical gesture completely unnecessary, and a tiny ball of orange light appeared in the air above us so Klute would be sure to see and understand. I dropped the globe, squashed it moistly under my heel at that spot where Leija's shattered head

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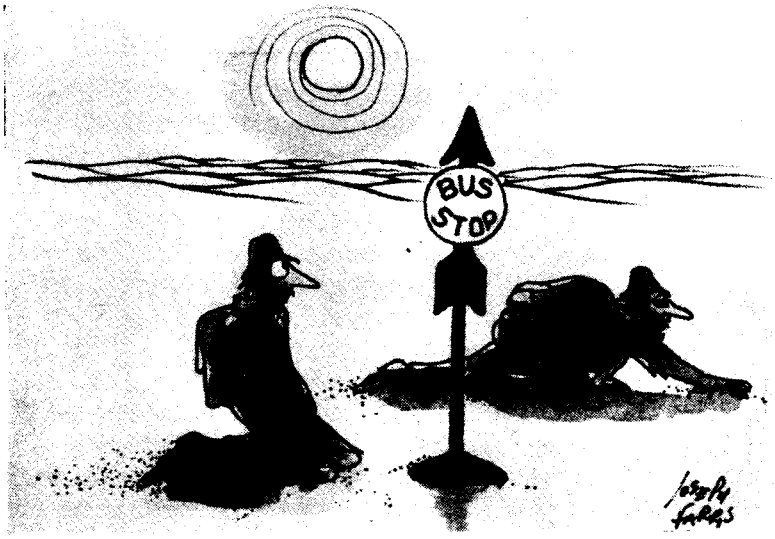
had rested, and told him, "I hate Alanya." I touched his temple with the forefinger of one hand. He screamed —or started to — and dropped like a stone. He twitched, and his eyes rolled in their sockets like marbles.

"Elemental," he managed to whisper, then became very still, his calm eyes focused on me.

I touched two fingers of each hand to either side of his forehead, and found with my mind the unique things that made Klute the dustdealer from Montra the being he was. Even as the transfiguration began, he knew what I was doing, and when it was over I couldn't even hear him screaming. But I knew he was.

I touched the mind of Klute's weary old mount, and it accepted without resentment my reasons for taking it back into the cold; the other two couldn't have cared less. The miniature sun flared out as we left.

Since it was I who had cared for the Golden Bruin the past year and a half, I made absolutely certain my departure left it no less secure than my presence. I closed and locked the stable door, checked again the Bruin's front entrance, then rode into the cold dark. I didn't think my mother would mind me collecting what Father owed her for her affections; that and a little interest. Every now and then I thought I heard a tiny scream from the transparent globe I wore around my neck. but it was just the wind singing me soft songs.



"You can wait, if you want. I'm going on."

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Installment 18: *In Which Youth Goeth Before a Fall*

Completing the thoughts begun last time. Subject under scrutiny: *Hommage,* the unsought gift that blights the original creation. In specific: YOUNG SHERLOCK HOLMES (Paramount).

It has been a month since I began this rumination, and the anger that seemed to build in me as I wrote the previous installment has abated somewhat. When I tried to analyze exactly what had sent me up into that spiral of rancor, no rational explanation presented itself. Like each of you, from time to time I find myself furious-beyond-proper-response; but whatever the stimulus — whether something I'd just read, or a snatch of radio news overheard while passing through a room, or a snippet of some television image — when the madness passes and I peel away the layers of emotion, I find that the snatch or snippet was only something that produced a resonance. The home videos of Imelda Marcos and her degenerate guests at Bonbon's birthday party in the Malacanang Palace, punked out and festooned with diamonds while 73% of the Filipino people were subsisting below the poverty level and scrounging for food in garbage heaps; rapists of a nation, cavorting and singing into Mr. Mikes; and the song they were singing was *We Are the World, We Are the Children.* An item in the

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Birmingham, Alabama *News* about a woman clerk in an airport newsstand who had been arrested for selling *Playboy,* and had drawn two years in jail for disseminating pornography. A moment of infuriating disingenuousness during a radio broadcast the day after Tombstone Tex Reagan won one for the Gipper in his shootout with Qaddafi — wrong or right, agree with him or not — that set my teeth on edge: stickily referring to the two F-111 pilots who went down as "heroes of our hearts."

Each produced a level of blinding animosity that spoke to something deeper than the events themselves. For, in truth, unpalatable as it is to admit, the starvation of thousands of little black babies in a faraway place does not affect us as deeply or lastingly or immediately as a stye on our eye, a particularly nasty cold sore on our lip, or our inability to have a good bowel movement. That we can be distracted at all from the petty yet vitally urgent imperatives of our petty yet vitally urgent personal existences is the miracle of the human race. That we can transcend the counterfeit emotions of the nanoseconds in which we lament the travail of those less fortunate than ourselves to feel genuine sorrow for others of our species, that transcendence that produces a Sojourner Truth, a Ralph Nader, or the man who passed the helicopter rescue ring to a drowning woman after the Washington, D.C. airliner crash, that creates Live Aid or the Red Cross, is the miracle that makes us the noblest experiment the universe has ever conjured up. Humbling and shaming as it may be to admit such weakness in ourselves, nonetheless it remains that what sends the burst of adrenalin through us at the snatch or snippet may only be the echo of an entirely personal, entirely human misery.

Shaking my head to clear the fog of anger, I finally located the source of my animosity toward Steven Spielberg and scenarist Chris Columbus and those who made *Young Sherlock Holmes;* the source of my rage at the cavalier rationale called ***hommage*** that permits, even encourages, less-talented johnny-come-latelies to corrupt the creations of their betters.

I fear another weird digression, by way of explanation, it necessary.

Here, elsewhere, and on many other occasions, I have railed against the indiscriminate acceptance of the loathesome theory of cinematic creation called the "auteur theory," wherein all glory and condemnation falls to the director. The writer is merely a hired hand; merely the one who constructs from nothing the "plan" on which the Noble Director builds the edifice of a movie; the creator who dreams the dream, sets it down so the package can be financed by a studio, the one who merely . . .

But listen to Francis Ford Coppola on this subject:

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"I like to think of myself as a writer who directs. When people go to see a movie, 80 percent of the effect it has on them was preconceived and precalculated by the writer. He's the one who imagines opening with a shot of a man walking up the stairs and cutting to another man walking down the stairs. A good script has pre-imagined exactly what the movie is going to do on a story level, on an emotional level, on all these various levels. To me, that's the primary act of creation."

There. Just that and no more. And insert *auteurism* where the passion don't never shine.

Of late, the *auteur* theory has crept into the world of comic books. (I said weird digression, but if you need an excuse not to screw up your face, consider that the comic book is more similar to a film than any other art-form, including the stage play; and thus, if you wanna duke it out, fit grist for this column.)

In some ways it is more a manifestation of the Starfucker Syndrome in commercial circles, but *auteurism* is what it is in bold terms. Whichever comic artist is this week's Big Star, why he or she is the one given carte blanche to rewrite the canon of any pre-existing character. Not even that universal icon, Superman, is safe.

DC Comics hired John Byrne away from Marvel by handing over the fifty-year-old legend of The Man of Steel for Mr. Byrne's tender attentions. With a hubris that would make even Paul Schrader or John Carpenter (but not Michael Cimino) blush, Byrne as *auteur* announced to anyone who would listen that everything that had gone before, from Siegel and Schuster's moment of creation through the decades of writers and artists who worked with the character, till this very instant, was null and void. He demanded, and got, DC to renumber *Superman Comics* — nearing issue #425 as I write this — from #1 with the pronunciamento that his was to be the only, the true, the preferred Superman.

Jim Shooter, at Marvel Comics, wields the *auteur* theory for his personal aggrandizement by creating "a new Marvel universe" containing an entire line of new books featuring characters who will not have to be introduced with the line *Stan Lee Presents*. Now they will say *Jim Shooter Presents;* and since kids only have x number of bucks to spend on items that cost 10¢ when I was a tot, but now cost between 75¢ and $2.50 a pop, that means sales will be diverted from such as Captain America, The Fantastic Four, The Hulk and Thor—creations of Jack Kirby and Stan Lee —that have become staples of the America pop culture idiom, staples whose fame surely must rankle the overweening ego of Mr. Shooter.

Back at DC, simply for bucks because he has confessed in interviews that he never cared a gram about the

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character, *auteur* Howard Chaykin has taken The Shadow and turned him, in a four-issue mini-series, into a sexist, calloused, clearly psychopathic obscenity. Rather than simply ignoring characters from the Shadow's past, Chaykin has murdered them in full view, blowing off their heads with shotguns through the peephole of apartment doors; strangling and stuffing them into water coolers; recasting them as winos and setting them on fire; impaling them (in defiance of the laws of gravity) through the neck with fireplace pokers and hanging them from balconies; and smashing in their skulls with hospital bedpans. And when Mr. Chaykin was asked why he had this penchant for drawing pictures of thugs jamming 45's into the mouths of terrified women, Mr. Chaykin responded that the only readers who might object to this bastardization of a much-beloved fictional character were "forty-year-old boys." These comics bear the legend FOR MATURE READERS.

For MATURE read DERANGED.

Here is *hommage* run amuck. Here is the delivering into the hands of artistic thugs the dreams and delights of those who were clever enough, and talented enough, to be prime creators. Not enough to suggest that they cobble up their own inventions as sturdy and long-lived as Superman or The Shadow. Not enough to suggest they retain some sense of their place in the creative world. Not enough to suggest they have a scintilla of respect for all the forty-year-old (and in this writer's case, fifty-two-year-old) boys who grew up on these wonders. Not enough.

No, these are the depredations that invoke wrath, that blind us with fury at their temerity, their callous disregard for those who made their employment and elevation to Stardom possible, their dishonest assumption of control of the treasure that ends in debasement of that which succored us in our adolescence.

The digression winds back on itself through funnybookland to the Spielberg-influenced *Young Sherlock Holmes,* written by Columbus, directed by Barry Levinson. And through the wandering, at last the explanation why writing a negative review of what is, at most, an exceedingly dumb movie produced such an unreasoning fulmination. The river runs swiftly, and it runs deep.

Last time I apologized for the seemingly unceasing attacks on Steven Spielberg. Since writing that previous installment I have been apprised that Steven takes no offense at my diatribes, that even when I savage him he finds the locutions so fascinating he cannot get upset. Well, maybe; and I hope that's the case; but it don't beat the bulldog. Spielberg reached the pinnacle of a certain kind of personal filmmaking with *E.T.,* and another summit with *Raiders of the Lost Ark*; pop masterpieces

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with their own voice and with a reverence for those genres and the best they had produced that endeared him to the cinema-going world. But his olympian success has brought forth as predictable side-effect a Visigoth horde of lesser-talented imitators who eschew genuine creativity for the despicable *auteurism* they rationalize as *hommage*.

Incapable of creating Superman or The Shadow or Sherlock Holmes, they steal the dream and turn it to their own ends, debasing it in the process.

Young Sherlock Holmes is the prime example.

Holmes, as a prep school boy, is made idiot foil to the extraneous special effects of Industrial Light & Magic truckling to the pinhead sophomorism of today's Cineplex audience needing its bread&circuses of cartoon ghoulies. Nowhere in the film do we see Holmes employ that aspect of his nature that has provided a niche in posterity for the Doyle-created detective — the use of observation, deductive logic, and ratiocination raised to an heroic level. The film is yet another dumb action-adventure featuring racist stereotypes, virgin sacrifices, running and jumping and hooting.

Columbus and his compatriots have swallowed whole the Spielberg idiom and reduced Holmes to a jerk. He dashes about, mostly to ill effect, with a boobish Watson puffing along behind, landing in one imbecile situation after another. The puzzle is finally solved, in defiance of everything in the Holmesian canon, not by logic and deduction, but by brute Ramboism.

Forget the infelicities of plot logic. Forget that one of the basic premises of this puppet-show is that Thugees could build a gigantic wooden pyramid in the center of London without anyone noticing. Forget that even facts of weather are bent to a moron plot: a major sequence, for instance, demands that we believe the Thames froze over. According to my research, not in recorded memory has the Thames frozen over. Much of the river is, incidentally, tidal; show me such a river that freezes. Forget that everything we found dear in the stories is contravened.

Forget all that. Even forget that the film is mostly boring. But don't forget that *hommage* such as this is simply the muddying of the waters, that it is dirty business.

The fifty-two-year-old boy speaks. Why must the johnny-come-lately destroy the dream? To what end? Is this the act of the responsible artist; is it even the act of one who loves the original?

Does Chaykin care that we derived our understanding of the simplistic but effective ethic that "the weed of crime bears bitter fruit" from a pulp hero who came to us in magazines that flaked apart in our laps,

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across the ether through cathedral-shaped radios before which we lay with eyes wide?

Does John Byrne consider for a moment between bouts with his own ego that some great section of the world looks on Superman as a paradigm for our own alienation and need to believe there is superness in each of us somewhere?

We chew up and spit out our past.

Honor lasts less long than Warhol's fabled fifteen minutes of notoriety. What remains for the dreamer capable of ushering out a Conan, a Sam Spade, a Tin Woodsman, a Wonder Woman, when any parvenu can misappropriate the vigorous conceit and cripple it by inexactitudes and ineptitude? If this can be done to Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, to Burroughs's Tarzan, to Pyle's Robin Hood or Johnston McCully's Zorro or Bad Bill's Hamlet . . . what chance do the rest of us have?

Is this too great a stretch of comprehension for you? Have you never slaved and sweated over something —as simple as a brick wall or as complex as a screenplay — and done it with all the grace and talent in you, only to see it taken over by some jamook who puffed himself up with arrogance like a banjo player who had a big breakfast?

We are talking here about the primacy of interest of the creator. We are talking about what it is that steals the souls from filmwriters in Hollywood who are compelled to turn their creations over to effectuators who label themselves *auteurs*.

Here is where the word *hommage* turns to ashes. Once permitted the incursion into the sacred preserve under the terminological rationale *hommage* — as twisty a device as calling revolutionaries "freedom fighters" — anything is permitted. If it succeeds, we say nothing, because art has asserted itself, even if it is derivative art of a secondary importance, of a flesh with pastiche. If it fails, we cluck our tongues and forget it.

This is a dismissal of the artist. It is the corruption in the bone marrow that destroys the purity of the dream. It is the leavening out, the "equality" of the untalented. It is in no way freedom, but a blanding that permits anything, without the nobility of the struggle for originality.

And it seems, these days, to be the pry-bar of the young. That arrogance shrieking at us from billboards and television sets and the midget-sized screens of coffin movie theaters— proclaiming (in the words of Ed Begley, senior not junior, in *Wild in the Streets*) that the young conceive of youth as the noblest state to which a human can aspire. Perhaps it is because this fifty-two-year-old boy spent those fifty-two years working toward some small proficiency in life and craft, that such fury is generated. Perhaps it is because movie studios geared to the viewing of tastes of an

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audience for whom nostalgia is remembering breakfast refuse to give contracts to writers over the age of thirty. Perhaps it is because more than half the membership of the Writers Guild over the age of fifty is not just unemployed, but *unemployable*. I speak here not of old farts who can't cut it, but writers of both sexes who have won Oscars, who have written the films we call classics, and who merely want to write the best they can, but who have been denied access to the marketplace because every twenty-year-old fresh out of some cornball media communications class in the boonies is pushing another tits-&ass coming-of-age flick bearing no greater worth than as a *perfect vehicle* for Mollie Ringwald or Tom Cruise. Vehicle they calls it; shitwagon, I calls it. Either way, it's spinach, and I don't give a damn.

Spielberg hath wrought a generation of young punks for whom hard work and patience are anathema. And what we have to deal with at the local cinema, what *I* have to deal with in these columns, is transient as snot and only half as uplifting.

Destruction of the past, whether as another De Laurentiis *King Kong* abomination, or as the leveling of an Art Deco building, is an American tradition. We eat yesterday and say it is of value only as sauce for our French fries.

Age, in and of itself, means nothing. But where age has produced craft and invention of a high order, there youth must wait its turn. Trevanian said, in SHIBUMI, "Do not fall into the error of the artisan who boasts of twenty years experience in his craft while in fact he has had only one year of experience — twenty times."

Contrariwise, do not think that brashness and the moment's limelight can supplant years spent making an artist. That is why Picasso remains a giant and Norman Rockwell can never be more than an enormously talented craftsman. Because Picasso could do what Rockwell did, but Rockwell was incapable of doing what Picasso did.

That is to say, Chris Columbus can write from now till doomsday, he can do *hommage* to Charles Foster Kane or Harry Lime till he's blue in the face, but Orson Welles, were he still around, even fat as Iowa, could create him into the ground.

Now that I've gotten *that* off my chest, maybe I can get some sleep.

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Sometimes the traditional "curse of a vampire" can be a blessing in disguise, as Richard Purtill ("By the Dragon's Cave," July 1984) demonstrates.

Something in the Blood

BY
RICHARD L. PURTILL

I always arrive at Franco's Bar just after sunset. In the summer there is still light in the sky and on the water; the lights flick on in the town and gleam from the few boats you can see far down the cliff, on the ocean that fills the ancient volcanic caldera. Classical music wells out of the hidden loudspeakers at Franco's, a little too loud but all the more compelling for that.

I sat down at my usual table, and the tall, dark young waiter brought me my usual ouzo and *mezedes* in silence. As I took my first sip of ouzo, I saw her at the next table. The way she was sitting brought her head just in line with the stone harpy on the corner of the terrace, and my first reaction was a purely aesthetic pleasure at the juxtaposition of the soft young face of flesh and the ageless face of stone. Then I realized that the faces were alike in a deeper way. No face that young and beautiful should wear such hopeless resignation, an expression that made her seem as ageless and as alien as the harpy.

When she turned to me and spoke, the expression was gone. Had I only imagined it, was it an illusion born of my own despair? "This must be the most beautiful place in the world," she said, her voice filled with wonder. "It was beautiful in the day, but now it's magical."

"I prefer it after the sun goes down, myself," I said. I couldn't quite keep the irony out of my voice, and she gave me a puzzled look. I had better give her an explanation she could accept. "The sun is my enemy," I told her. "My skin is very sensitive to sunlight. But even aside from that, I find the sunlight on our volcanic rock and ash too harsh. In the day, Santorini

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seems to me too bleak, too unfriendly to humans."

She nodded with a thoughtful expression. "I see what you mean," she said. "There is something eerie and a little frightening about Santorini for all its beauty. But you said 'our rocks'; are you a native of the island?"

"I've lived here a long time," I said, "and I consider it my home, but the local people still don't really accept me as one of them. Still, I probably know more about Santorini than most of the people born here. Is there anything I can tell you about the island or its history?" It was the first move in a familiar game, a game I had played with many of the young female tourists who streamed through the island every summer, enhancing my life and making the long winter bearable because of what I had gotten from them. But very few of them were as lovely as this girl, or as charming. Had I only imagined that deep sadness in her eyes?

She laughed a little self-consciously and said, "Oh, it's absurd, you'll laugh at me, but I am curious about. . . . Well, do the local people really believe these stories about Santorini? I mean, someone on the mainland warned me about coming here; she was really serious. She said . . . well, she said that there were vampires on Santorini. Now you'll laugh."

I smiled and said lightly, "Oh, no, it's a well-known fact that we have vampires and all sorts of weird creatures. Take the man sitting down there on the lower terrace, the one with the bushy eyebrows. He's a werewolf. Only the other day he told me a sad story. He tried to save money by taking the ferry to Athens in his wolf form — he can pass for a very large German shepherd. But a steward saw him and put an iron chain around his neck before he knew what the man was up to. He spent most of the night tied up on deck with no food or water. If a softhearted English tourist hadn't let him loose, he might have been put in the dog pound in Piraeus."

She laughed. "All right, I asked for it," she said. I guess my grandmother told me too many ghost stories when I was a kid. I still half believe that stuff. You tell a pretty mean story yourself, Mr. . . ."

"Nikolas Tsouras," I told her. "Please call me Niko. And you are . . . ?"

"Ann Morris," she said, "and I am very pleased to meet you. Let me ask you a more practical question, Niko. Can you get anything to eat here? I'm getting awfully hungry; I've been sightseeing too hard to eat much."

I shook my head. "There's a cold plate on the menu," I told her, "but usually they say they're out of it. I often just nibble at the *mezedes* all evening — The little appetizers they bring you with the ouzo. But if you're really hungry, there are several good restaurants nearby. Let me take you to one."

She looked at me for a long mo-

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ment while I tried to keep the predatory gleam out of my eyes, then she nodded. "All right," she said with a strange little smile. "After all, what did I come to the Greek islands for, if I'm going to turn down an invitation like that from a tall, dark, handsome stranger with an interesting pallor. Let's go."

I took her to Zorba's for dinner; a noisy, lively place where the waiters are friendly and the food is good. Ann enjoyed the food and the wine in a way that seemed to have a curious urgency to it, as if she hadn't eaten or drunk for a long time or expected not to for a long time. But though her enthusiasm was a little frantic, it was also delightful: she seemed charmingly eager to enjoy everything — the food, the night air, the cheerfully impudent little boy who served as our busboy and wine waiter.

"I like to see kids doing something useful," she said. "At home they seem to think the world owes them perpetual entertainment. And of course in America they'd never let a kid this young work in a restaurant where they serve drinks, much less bring the wine and open it for you. By the way, the wine is delicious; I'm really sold on your Santorini wines."

This was my chance. I told her about our Santorini wine industry, about how our volcanic soil gives a special taste to the wine. Then I said casually, "I live in an old converted winery, and have a little cellar of vintage wines that were grown within a kilometer or so of my home. Perhaps you'd like to see my house sometime and taste some of the wines."

She hesitated, and I could see her getting ready to say "No"; she wasn't the sort of woman who'd normally accept an invitation like that so soon after meeting a man. Then she looked at me and gave a strangely sad little smile. "Why not?" she said. "I don't have all that much time left, and after all . . ."

"After all, why did you come to the Greek islands," I teasingly finished her sentence for her. She laughed and rose to her feet. "Let's go," she said. I'll always remember Ann that first night saying "Let's go," to every suggestion, with that strange little note of recklessness, almost desperation in her voice.

There were no taxis to be had at that time of night, so we walked to Theotocopolous Square and took the local bus out to my village. At a stop just outside of town, Old Mavrodontes got on, and as soon as he saw me started cursing and abusing me in his high, cracked voice. "*Vrikolakas!*" he yelled, "Vrikolakas!" The conductor hustled him to the back of the bus, with an apologetic smile to Ann. If I had been alone, he would not have interfered between myself and old Mavrodontes. But Ann was a foreigner, and in Greece the foreigner is a guest, not to be bothered with local feuds.

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"What was that all about?" Ann asked, a little shaken by the old man's vehemence.

I shrugged. "I'm not popular with some of my neighbors," I told her. "When I converted the old winery to a home, some people lost jobs, though the ones who really wanted to found work elsewhere easily enough. Some felt injured because they had to go a few kilometers to work at other wineries instead of just walking down the road. And some people would like to buy my winery and make money by putting it back into production. The wine business is booming here."

"You seem to be proud of your local wines, but you let me drink most of that bottle at dinner," she said. "Of course you might have had an ulterior motive for that," she added drily.

"I don't drink much," I said, "not much wine, at any rate." Again I couldn't keep the irony out of my voice, and she gave me a thoughtful look, but said no more. When we got to my little village, we got off the bus to the accompaniment of a last stream of abuse from Mavrodontes and walked up the little lane to my home. I unlocked the door, turned on the lights, and turned to usher Ann in.

She was looking at the little graveyard next to my house with a strange expression on her face, but when I touched her arm she smiled at me and seemed suddenly full of energy and gaiety. I put some records on my stereo, and we danced and tasted my wine and danced again. At the end of the last record, she put her arms around my neck and kissed me lingeringly. "Is that the bedroom behind that door?" she asked softly. "Let's go."

At first her lovemaking had that same frantic quality that I had seen in her before, but after the first time she grew calmer and it was slow and sweet and good — better than it had been for me for a long, long time. At last she seemed to sleep, but when I raised myself on my elbow and looked down at her face, her eyes opened. "All right," she said, "go ahead." She leaned her head back so that her throat arched, and smiled that curious smile.

"Go ahead?" I said, pretending to be puzzled. She laughed softly.

"Niko, I told you that my grandmother filled my head with stories — not just stories, either; she *knew*. I think she was half a witch herself. From the stories my grandmother told me, you've got to be a vampire. Your face is pale, your lips are red, your teeth are sharp. You don't like the sun, and you come out only at night. You live next door to a graveyard, and the local people all act a little leery of you, except that old man. The name he called you means vampire, doesn't it? I ran across it somewhere reading about Greek legends and superstitions. Except they aren't

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just superstitions, are they? Go ahead, take my blood if that's what you want, what you need. I don't mind. Perhaps later I'll tell you why."

"All right, my dear," I said quietly. "But I won't mark your lovely throat. It's much better here." I bent over her thigh, found the femoral artery and entered it with one quick bite. She shuddered, and shuddered again when after drinking deep I withdrew. The wounds closed quickly — something in my saliva has that effect — but not before a few drops of blood had trickled out. She looked at them and then at me.

"That was . . . kind of kinky, but I could get to like it," she said." You really are a real . . ."

"*Vrikolakas,*" I said. "You didn't really believe it, did you? But there's something else hard to believe. You're dying, aren't you? Something in your blood is killing you slowly; I can feel it in what I drank."

Tears welled from her eyes; she made no effort to wipe them away, but lay there naked and defenseless with the tears running down her face. "Oh Niko, will my blood hurt you?" she asked brokenly. "I didn't really want that. It was like a story I was telling myself; you were a vampire, but I'd fool you because my blood was . . . bad. I didn't think that . . ."

I shook my head; the familiar warmth was tingling in my body, and I knew that whatever was wrong in her blood did not affect the use my body made of it. There are advantages in being one of the Undead. "No poison can harm me," I told her, "Including, it seems, whatever deadly thing is in your blood. But it can harm you, my dear. Now I know why you seemed to be grasping so frantically at enjoyment. How long did the doctors give you?"

"They told me a month before I began to get really sick," she said. "And I felt that I'd never lived at all. I quit my job, sold everything I could sell, even borrowed money. I suppose that's dishonest; I'll never live to pay it back. Then I came here to the Greek islands, the place I'd always dreamed of visiting. If I was going to have only a month, at least for that month I wanted to *live*. Then I met you . . ." She touched the almost-healed wounds on her thigh with wonder on her face. "Will I become a vampire now?" she asked. "What's it like to be a vampire?"

"So long as I only take your blood, no, you will not become what I am," I said. "I would have to reverse the flow and give you some of mine — quite a bit, in fact. Then the parasite that makes me what I am would grow in you, and your body would adapt. What flows in my veins is not exactly blood, but it combines with blood, even diseased blood like yours. The mixture is very powerful. My body heals itself from almost any wound, casts off every disease. And so long as I get new blood periodical-

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ly, I will never die. There are disadvantages, of course; my skin has no melanin at all, and I could get a severe sunburn from being out in the sun only a short time. But I'm sensitive to cold and damp, too. That's why I live in this climate."

"And during the day . . ." she began, then hesitated.

I laughed, "Lie down in my grave?" I said. "Well, in a way. Even a tiny bit of light or noise can bother me when I try to sleep, and I have a little sleeping room fixed up in a family crypt in the graveyard next door. It has to look like a real crypt in case anyone ever gets in there, but it's very snug and comfortable. Want to see it?"

"Let's go," she said a little shakily, and began to dress. I started to help her, and that caused some delay, but eventually we were dressed again and walked out of the house into the little graveyard. Somebody had been taking out their hostility to me on the tomb that covered the crypt — Mavrodontes or one of the others. The little ornamental chain that made a sort of fence around the top of the tomb had been wrenched from its supports and lay in a heap on the top of the tomb, and someone had battered the little frame that is supposed to hold a picture of the person most recently buried in the crypt. I used to put a mirror in the frame so that anyone looking to see the face of the dead would see their own face. But no one liked my little joke, and the mirror was always broken. I no longer replaced the mirror, but they still battered the frame.

Ann looked at the tomb and bit her lip. "Do the local people hate you so much?" she asked in a small voice. "Do you . . .?"

I shook my head. "No, I leave the locals strictly alone," I said. "There are always young tourist girls who can spare some blood and think the whole experience is a rather kinky thrill. Half of them don't even realize what's happening, or what I am. Most of the local people know about us, though some pretend not to. Some are quite decent to me. I'll have to ask Father Athanasius to preach another sermon about the wickedness of desecrating graves — even mine."

Ann was hurt by what I had said about the tourist girls — there was no way she couldn't be. But she said nothing about that, only asked in a steady voice, "You said the local people know about 'us'— are there others . . . like you . . . here?"

I shrugged. "Not so many now as there once were, and some of them have grown very strange over the long years. There are those of them who take no food and drink at all, except blood. If you do that, your body changes in some ways I don't find pleasant. I try to keep at least some hold on humanity. The girls are as much for that as for the blood. But whether you believe this or not, Ann,

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you are much different from the others for me — very different."

"I believe you, Niko," Ann said quietly. "We have something in common, you and I. We both have something in our blood that's — different. Mine won't let me live, but yours won't let you die. I thought my problem was as bad as could be, but I'm not sure yours isn't worse."

In all the years, she was the only one who had come close to understanding, and my voice was not quite under control as I said, "The loneliness is the worst. I don't dare to love anyone. If they are not what I am, they will go and die and my loneliness would be worse than before. And I could never bear to make anyone else what I am, as some of the others have done. How could they help but hate me when they realized what I had condemned them to?"

Ann looked at me for a long time in silence. Then she said in an oddly expressionless voice, "Show me where you sleep during the day." The little moment of closeness was over; perhaps it never really existed. Her problem gave her some insight into mine, but not enough. To be condemned to death is easier than to be condemned to life.

I led her to the little slab near the tomb that gave access to the crypt. The slab carved with a skull and a motto in Greek. "Vanity of vanity, all is vanity," I translated for her. "Plenty of people believe that now, but they don't dare remind themselves of it. This slab was made by people who still believed in an afterlife; they didn't mind being reminded of their mortality. It's a different kind of reminder for me; I could die, but I'd have to choose to. I've never had the courage, even when things seemed worst. As Hamlet says, 'For in that sleep of death what dreams may come. . . . Must give us pause.' But perhaps someday I'll lose something that I can't bear living with the loss of, and I'll make the choice to die. . . . Sorry, it's chilly out here. Will you step into my grave?"

She gave a shaky little laugh as I lifted the slab and capped my quotation with another from *Hamlet:* "Indeed, that is out o' the air." A wave of desolation swept through me as we descended the narrow steps. I had more in common with Ann than with any other woman I had ever talked with, laughed with, loved with. But she had only a month before the sickness drained her of life. I was at last facing a loss I couldn't live with.

My little crypt is ancient and has some paintings on the wall; strange, wild-eyed saints with golden halos. I had restored them little by little over the years. So long as I am shut away from the sunlight, I can be active for much of the day. Perhaps I am shortening my extended life span by doing so. Surely the comalike state we normally enter during the day accounts for some of our longevity — it

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is more like suspended animation than sleep.

Ann was exclaiming over the wall paintings when we heard a noise from above us. Someone was battering on the door of my house and shouting. It might have been wiser to pull the slab down and lock it, let whoever it was take out their rage on my practically impregnable door, but this interruption of my precious time with Ann put me into a red rage, and without thinking I ran up the stairs with her at my heels.

What we saw when we emerged was like a scene from an old, bad movie. Hammering on my door was a wild-eyed young man, obviously an American. Standing beside him with a flaring torch in his hand was Mavrodontes with a wicked grin on his face. When he saw us emerge, he pointed his finger at us and shouted melodramatically, "There is the vampire and his victim!"

"Fool," I spat at Mavrodontes in Greek. "This time you have gone too far! Have you forgotten that the house you live in is mine and on my land? Always before I have thought of your wife and daughter and left you in the house, despite your mischief-making. But now I will give your wife a choice. Either you behave yourself or the whole family must leave the house. How do you think she will choose, Mavrodontes? She is as tired of your antics as I am!"

The old man's jaw dropped and the torch almost fell from his hand. He was as lazy as he was mischievous, and his drinking was paid for by what his wife and daughter earned. Their home was important to them, and he knew very well that if I threatened them with the loss of it, he would get no peace — and no more drinking money — if he made any more trouble. He took a step backward, and I know that at the first opportunity he would slip away, abandoning his American ally.

As soon as I stopped speaking, Ann stepped forward and blazed out at the young American. "What the *hell* are you doing here, Harry? Before I left, I told you I never wanted to see you again! Did you follow me to this island?"

The young man flushed but looked stubborn. "What did you expect me to do when I found you'd sold everything, including some stuff of mine, and told everyone you weren't coming back? Your doctor wouldn't tell me anything, but I know you flew off the handle right after you went in for that checkup. All right, maybe I gave you something; you know I play around sometimes. But I always come back to you, don't I? Damn it, Ann, I need you!"

Ann's voice when she replied was full of honeyed malice. "You *need* me, do you, Harry? Well you're going to have to do without me. Do you know what I got from you, Harry? AIDS, that what. If you were really

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gay or really bi, maybe I could forgive that, but you don't even really like boys. You just have to show what a big swinger you are, ready to try anything once. Well, you tried "anything" once too often, Harry. The doctor told me I had only a few months to live!"

Harry's face was paler than mine in the light of the torch, and his voice was barely under control. "Oh my God," he whimpered. "If I gave it to you, I must have it myself. I've got to get to a doctor, to a hospital . . ." He turned and stumbled toward the road, where I could see a car parked, probably one of the rental cars from the town. Mavrodontes called a curse after him, seeing his last hope of making trouble for me vanishing. Perhaps the old man had even hoped that he could egg on the young American to kill me; I saw that in his other hand he actually had a sharpened stake!

"On your way, old fool," I snapped. "And as for that stake, you can take it and . . ." But I had pushed him too far; he was both drunker and crazier than I had thought. He threw the stake like a javelin, right at my face. At that distance he could hardly miss; I felt a blinding pain in my head, and blackness descended on me. The last sounds I heard were Ann's scream and the fleeing footsteps of Mavrodontes.

I awoke in the crypt with an aching head, feeling strangely weak. Ann was sitting on the floor beside my coffin, leaning on the wall behind her. Her eyes were closed, and there was an odd-looking tangle of stuff on the floor beside her; I recognized some old tubing left over from when the winery had been in operation which she must have found in my storage closet.

When I tried to move, a pain shot through my head and I gave a little involuntary groan. Ann's eyes opened, and she smiled at me. "Your head probably feels terrible, but that stake didn't hit you square on, and the gash it made on the side of your head was half closed when I started to bandage it — I've never seen anybody heal so quickly."

She took a deep breath and went on. "If you feel weak, Niko, it's because you've lost blood while you were unconscious. I transfused about a pint of your blood into myself, and probably wasted almost another pint with my makeshift apparatus. I'm sorry, but I didn't think I could persuade you to do it yourself, your way. You said you'd never make another person . . . like yourself . . . because they'd hate you for it. Well, you didn't do it to me. I did it to myself."

I was already feeling a little better, and I raised myself on my elbow to peer into her face in the dim light of the fluorescent camp lantern that lit the crypt. "But why, Ann?" I cried, "why did you do it?"

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She smiled at me. "Because I love you, you idiot. I won't say that it wasn't partly fear of dying, fear of the kind of sickness I'd have to go through before dying, but it was mostly because I wanted to be with you so you won't be so terribly lonely anymore . . ." A thought struck her, and she looked at me with panic in her eyes. "Niko, will it work? Have I wasted your blood for nothing when you were already wounded?"

I sighed. "My darling fool, if you took a pint of my blood, the parasite should be well established in your body," I said. "And there's no reversing what you've done. Give me your hand. A little blood from your finger will tell me if the change is complete yet."

It was; the "blood" might as well have been my own, and had as little sustenance for me. "My dear," I said gently, "you've accomplished what you wanted to. I hope you'll never regret it. But now both of us will need blood. I can last for a while on what I took from you last night, and the conversion of your own blood will last you for a long time. But eventually both of us must . . . drink."

She smoothed the bandage on my head with gentle fingers and smiled. "I have plans about that, Niko," she said. "No more tourist girls for you, my lad. I'm a registered nurse — that's why I know how to do the transfusion — and if there's one thing I know about, it's blood. That's why getting AIDS myself from Harry was such a tragic irony. What you and I are going to do is open a blood bank."

I stared at her, speechless, and she laughed at me. "Sounds crazy, doesn't it? Two vampires running a blood bank. But it will work — if you could tell I had AIDS from one drink of my blood, I bet you can detect other things wrong with blood that we get from paid donors. Hepatitis is a real headache, because people aren't always aware they have it. You can screen the blood, and we can take any "bad" blood for our own use. Brokering blood can be a profitable business anyway, if it's efficiently run. I'll bet we can make a living at it as well as supplying our own needs. There's always a market for a reliable source of blood — and who knows more about blood than a vampire?"

It was utter madness — but it worked. It took time and a great deal of money to get established. For a while we thought we would have to sell the winery building. We had to take a Greek doctor into partnership to satisfy government regulations, but that gave us valuable contacts in the medical community, and Dr. Elias is too well armored with scientific prejudices to ever realize what we are and what we do with the blood that we screen out.

We have to be in Athens much more than we like, for Santorini of course is too small to support a blood

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service on the scale we need. With factor-twenty sunscreen and extra-strong photogray sunglasses, we can stand brief exposure to the sun, and we usually take the overnight ferry to and from Piraeus. Our blood clinic in Athens is an old warehouse with no windows, lit by fluorescent lights. When the sun goes down, we enjoy the late leisurely Greek restaurant meals and the nightlife of the city.

But Santorini is still our home. We spend as much time here as we can. Ann has softheartedly bribed Mavrodontes into behaving himself with a "caretaker's" job where he does a minimum of work and earns enough for a maximum of drinking. Perhaps the old fool will drink himself to death soon, but I doubt it — he's too tough. Ann's ex-lover, Harry, was not tough at all — we found out that he had committed suicide when it was confirmed that he did have AIDS.

So we live untroubled by old enemies and have even made a few friends. Ann has hopes for a research program that may someday turn our curse into a blessing. We already can synthesize the substance in my saliva that heals bite wounds, and we use it at the blood bank. Perhaps we will tire of our life, perhaps we will even tire of each other, but I do not think so. There are deep bonds between us. My blood saved Ann from death; her companionship rescued me from loneliness and despair. We do no harm and perhaps a little good now.

For old times' sake, whenever we are on Santorini, we go for an evening drink at Franko's Bar. We always arrive after sunset.

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Brad Strickland's last story here was "Pira," (August 1985); his new novel, TO STAND BENEATH THE SUN, was recently published by NAL/Signet. Here, he offers a short, chilling tale about the ultimate nightmare . . .

In the Hour Before Dawn

BY
BRAD STRICKLAND

Charles was unmistakably in the country of dreams. He stood alone in a shallow, bowl-like valley, scooped from fine-grained, silvery sand. Here and there boulders interrupted the gently curved surface, boulders that were themselves smooth and golden, like polished statues of sleeping elephants.

Charles's own body seemed indistinct. He could not say whether he wore a suit, shirt and trousers, or nothing at all. Otherwise his senses registered nothing unusual. The air smelled like air. When he stooped and thrust his hand into the sand, it was silky and cool to the touch. It tasted of nothing. Standing with head bowed, as if intent on prayer or thought, he heard no sound. And as for vision, except for the bowl-shaped valley and the boulders, all he could see was the sky, domed like a lid badly put into place over him, a luminescent mother-of-pearl gray all around the horizon's edge, darkening in the concavity overhead to a red-purple, reminding him of the color of a bruise.

I am dreaming, Charles thought suddenly. How strange, to be dreaming, and to be aware that he was dreaming! As strange, he suspected, as to be fully awake and to be aware that one was fully awake. The thought struck him as in some sense profound, and to himself, he thought, *That is something I must remember. I must hold on to that idea for the time when I awake.*

"Excuse me." In that silence the voice boomed loud as an earthquake, startling as summer thunder. "Excuse me. I am dreaming of you, I know, but I don't know you."

Charles turned. The speaker had

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just come from behind one of the boulders. He was a man about Charles's age — thirty-one — but shorter, much darker of hair and eye, and more muscular. Oddly, Charles had less trouble seeing the stranger than he had seeing himself: the man wore tan trousers, no shirt, no shoes. Heat glistened in the perspiration underlying the dark mat of chest hair. "That's odd," Charles said. "I am dreaming you, and you believe yourself to be dreaming me. How very odd."

The other man had a one-sided smile, a quarter inch higher on the left side of his face than his right. "You're wrong. *I* am dreaming you. Don't confuse yourself by imagining you really exist."

Charles laughed. "Certainly I exist. I have a name and address. I am Charles Dayton, and I live on Revere Drive in Somerville. My students at the university would be very surprised to find that I *don't* exist. Maybe not unhappy, but definitely surprised."

The stranger shook his head, still smiling his one-sided smile. "I don't know how I came to dream of a teacher from Somerville. I don't even know where that is — if there is such a place. But I *know* I exist. I'm Paul Dupont. I'm a trial lawyer. And I live in Sierra Heights, outside of Santa Rosita, with my wife."

"I've got a wife, too," Charles blurted, feeling obscurely as if the other had scored a point. "Now look, I never dream of strangers. Always people I know, or sort of odd conglomerations of people I know. I don't know you — and I don't believe there's even a place named Santa Rosita."

Paul looked annoyed. "Come to think of it, I've never dreamed up a stranger, either. Not one with a phony name and address, anyhow. But there's always a first time."

"What am I wearing?" Charles asked.

Paul frowned. "What do you mean by that?"

"Come on," Charles said. "You call yourself a lawyer — you're supposed to have some intelligence, aren't you? Just tell me what you see. How am I dressed?"

"You're barefoot. You have on some white shorts; tennis shorts, I guess. That's all. So what?"

"What are you wearing?" Charles asked.

Paul frowned down at himself. "Something's keeping me from seeing it. I guess I haven't dreamed that part yet."

"You're not dreaming at all. Get it through your head that *you're* the imaginary one. I am real, and my home and family are real. There's no Paul, no wife, no Santa Rosita."

"Nonsense!" The lawyer paced back and forth on the silver sand, his head down. Then he paused and gazed sidelong at Charles. "Is it not true that you never know when you're dreaming?"

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"No. I know I'm dreaming now."

"Have you ever done it before? Known you were dreaming while you were dreaming?"

"Not that I remember."

Paul turned to face Charles. "Then you would say that it's unusual for you to be aware of your own dreams, while you are actually dreaming?"

"Very unusual," Charles agreed, amused at how much like a real lawyer his imaginary lawyer sounded.

Paul's voice rang with triumph: "Then that indicates, wouldn't you say, that the probability is that you are not dreaming now — because you cannot dream, you are just a figment of my imagination?"

"That's idiotic. Look, Paul whatever-your-name-is, you may think you're real, but that's only because I dreamed you so well. I gave you the illusion of reality so strongly that you believe in yourself."

Paul wouldn't give up. "But isn't it at least as likely that I have given you the illusion of reality? That I have dreamed *you* so well that you believe you exist, when in fact you do not?" He stooped suddenly, snatched a handful of sand, and flung it at Charles.

Charles spun, lifting his arm to ward off the stinging particles. They hit forearm, shoulder, neck, but missed his eyes. "Hey!"

"Funny," Paul said. "I thought it'd go right through you. Maybe I ought to try a rock."

Charles rubbed a hand across his face and held up a dripping palm. "Look at that. I suppose you think that isn't real?"

"Imaginary sweat," scoffed Paul. "You fool. Even if you were right, you'd still be dreaming it, so even then it wouldn't be real. And if I dreamed of something as unpleasant as you, I could certainly dream of sweat."

Charles stalked over to Paul. He came so close he could feel the exhaled breath of the other man stirring the air, could hear the faint rush of it through the other's nose and sinuses. "See if this seems real," he said, and hit the other man in the mouth.

Paul reeled back, blood spurting from a cut lip. He shook his head, scattering drops that made pear-shaped red spatters on the sand, and then lunged head down at Charles. The two rolled over in the silver sand, and though Charles strained muscle and sinew, it was no use. They were too evenly matched and too inexpert for either to get a temporary advantage.

Charles's breath burned hot and harsh when at last both of them rested on hands and knees, a yard away from each other. Both were panting, sweating, and bleeding. "This is nonsense," Paul said. "Soon I'll wake up, and you will be gone."

"I agree," Charles said. "Except *I'll* wake up, and you will vanish."

"Then all we have to do is wait."

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Paul pushed up, grimacing as if weary and in pain. He backed away and sat on one of the golden boulders. His shoulders bowed and his chest heaved.

Charles sank onto another stone. He felt every ache in his muscles, every rip in his skin, every drop of sweat that crawled like a warm little snail down his face. *I am real,* Charles thought. *I will wake up, and it will all be as it has been before. He will vanish.* He looked into the other's haunted eyes. *He really believes that he is the dreamer,* Charles thought. *He really does — just as I do.* Panic fluttered light butterfly wings in his belly. *What if he is right?* Charles wondered for the first time.

Almost simultaneously, he read the exact thought in the other's eyes.

Exhausted, helpless beneath the bruised dome of the dreamed sky, the two sat staring at one another, hating one another, and waiting out the hour before dawn.

Waking came quickly, with an outrush of breath. He looked up at the familiar white ceiling. From the corner of his left eye, he could see the night table where he had carelessly thrown his trousers last night. Through the open bedroom door came kitchen sounds and smells. Meg making Monday's breakfast for the two of them.

He had not wept in ages, but he did now. He closed his eyes. "God," he said. "What did I do to deserve that?" Then he laughed silently, his chest bucking beneath the sheet.

"You awake?" Meg called.

He did not trust himself to speak.

After a moment she called again, closer, louder, "Honey, wake up. Time to get going. You have to be in court at nine."

He frowned. "Court? What in hell do you mean?"

A strange women stood in the doorway. "Paul, get up. What's got into you this morning?"

Open mouthed. she backed into the hallway as the man in the bed held out his dark-skinned arms, studied his compact hands, and started to scream.

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THE CONSEQUENCES OF PIE

On November 11, 1985, my doorman said to me as I came in, "You are on Page Six of the *New York Post*, Dr. Asimov."

My eyebrows went up. Page Six is the page on which personal items are retailed — a kind of gossip page. At least, so I'm told; I don't often see the *Post*. "What about?" I said.

The doorman grinned. "You were kissing a woman, Dr. Asimov." And he handed me the paper.

Well, my kissing a woman isn't news. Personally, I think that women have been particularly put together for kissing. So why should the *Post* bother? I opened the paper to Page Six as the elevator took me up to my apartment.

I walked into the apartment and said to my dear wife, Janet, "It's finally happened, Janet. I kissed a woman and it made the gossip column in a newspaper."

"Oh, no," said Janet, who knows all about this amiable weakness of mine. "Now everyone we know will phone to tell me about it."

"Who cares?" I said, and I handed her the paper. Here is the item, complete:

"A city kid like Isaac Asimov doesn't need a drive-in movie. The prolific sci-fi (sic) writer didn't seem to care who saw him hugging and kissing a woman at the New York Academy of Science on East 63rd

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Street during a recent screening of the new TBS show, *Creation of the Universe*. And why should he? The lady was his wife of 12 years, Janet Jeppson. Maybe it was the title that got the two sexagenarians going."

Janet laughed very heartily. She was so amused, she didn't even mind being called a sexagenarian, even though at the time of the incident (November 5), she was only 59¼ years old.

But I said, "You miss the point, Janet. Think what it tells us of our society. We have a man in his late youth kissing his own wife, and this is considered so unusual that it makes the newspapers."

And yet odd items are not only recorded in newspapers, but even in history books — and the most trivial things might turn out to be important. In the history of science, for instance, there is the sinister incident of the landlady and her Sunday pie—

The story involves a Hungarian chemist named Gyorgy Hevesy (1885-1966). His father was an industrialist ennobled by the Austro-Hungarian Emperor Francis Joseph I, so that the chemist's name is sometimes given as "von Hevesy."

In 1911, Hevesy had a dispute with his landlady. He claimed that the remains of the pie she routinely served on Sunday were recycled and put into the food served during the remainder of the week. (For myself, I don't consider that a criminal operation, but in the days before the commonplace presence of efficient home refrigeration, such recycling might have been risky.) Naturally, the landlady denied the charge vigorously.

As it happened, Hevesy was working in Ernest Rutherford's laboratory at Cambridge at the time. Rutherford and his students were deeply engaged in research on radioactivity, and this meant that Hevesy could get a small trace of radioactive substance. What he used, in fact, was a tiny bit of the breakdown products of thorium.

When the meal was finished one Sunday, Hevesy added a smidgeon of the radioactive substance to the pie when no one was looking. The following Wednesday, a souffle was served, and Hevesy got out his electroscope.

An electroscope consists of two gold leaves enclosed in a chamber. The gold leaves are attached to a rod, one end of which sticks out of the chamber. If the outer end of the rod is touched by an electrically-charged object, the two gold leaves are each similarly charged and repel each other, so that they form an upside-down V.

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If such a charged electroscope is subjected to hard radiation of the kind that radioactive substances produce, then the charge is carried away and the two leaves collapse toward each other. When the electroscope was brought near the souffle, the gold leaves at once began to collapse. In other words, the souffle was radioactive, and it was so only because it contained bits of the Sunday pie.

Hevesy had, in other words, marked the pie with a radioactive label and had then traced the movements of that label. It was the first use of a "radioactive tracer" in history, albeit for a trivial purpose.

Hevesy himelf disparaged the event and considered it unimportant, but that wasn't so. If nothing else, it got him to thinking about radioactive tracing, and that had its consequences.

In 1913, he applied the principle of radioactive tracing to a chemical problem. Many lead compounds are only slightly soluble. It is of chemical interest to know just how soluble each might be, but it is hard to make accurate measurements of the matter. Suppose you powder a lead compound and add it to water. You stir it till as much of the compound has dissolved as possible. You then filter off the undissolved powder and analyze the clear fluid for dissolved compound. There is so little compound present, however, that it is very difficult to determine its concentration exactly.

Hevesy decided that it was only necessary to mix ordinary lead with lead-210, which is formed in the course of uranium breakdown and was, in those days, called "Radium D." Lead-210 would mix with ordinary lead and, since its chemical proprties were identical with ordinary lead, it would undergo whatever changes the latter did. The lead with its radioactive admixture would then be used to form a particular compound, which would contain a tiny percentage of lead-210. The exact quantity of lead-210 present could easily be determined by measuring the intensity of radioactive radiation. This is such a sensitive type of measurement that it would yield accurate results despite the small quantity present.

If the lead compound were now dissolved, the lead-210 version of the compound would dissolve also, and in precisely the same proportion as the compound itself. By measuring the percentage of the lead-210 that was present in solution, we would automatically be measuring the percentage of the total compound that had dissolved. In this way, solubility could be determined far more accurately than by earlier methods.

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By 1918, Hevesy was using both radioactive lead and radioactive bismuth to study the behavior of hydrogen compound of those metals.

Then, in 1923, Hevesy used radioactive tracers for the first time in biochemical research. He added small amounts of a lead solution to the fluid used to water plants he was working with. Plants take up mineral salts from water in the soil, and, presumably, they would take up lead compounds, too, in very small quantities. Hevesy had used lead compounds, for the purpose, that had a bit of radioactive lead-210 present. At various intervals of time, plants were burned and the ash was analyzed for radioactivity. In this way, the progress of lead uptake and the lead content of various portions of the plant could be followed accurately.

There is, however, a limit to what you can do with lead and bismuth, especially in biochemical problems, since neither element occurs naturally in living tissue (except as an accidental contaminant). For that reason, Hevesy's reports, while they seemed to have some interest, were regarded as a dead end. It was not until 1943 that the consequences of his work (and of his landlady's Sunday pie) were seen to be supremely important, and he was then given the Nobel prize in chemistry.

Here's how radioactive tracing came to assume great importance—

At first glance, it would seem that radioactivity is confined entirely to the exotic elements at the upper end of the periodic table. Uranium (element #92) and thorium (#90) break down and produce dozens of different products. These products include atoms with atomic numbers as low as 82, but no lower. (There were far too many breakdown products for each to have a separate atomic number, and it was this that first placed Frederick Soddy on the track of isotopes — as I mentioned two months ago.)

Of all the breakdown products, only those that were isotopes of lead (#82) or bismuth (#83) were of elements that also possessed stable isotopes. The study of radioactive phenomena through the 1920's revealed no radioactive isotopes of any element with an atomic number less than 82, and it seemed a reasonable supposition that radioactive isotopes of these lighter elements simply didn't exist.

Then came the work of Frederic Joliot-Curie (1900-1958) and his wife Irene Joliot-Curie (1897-1956), who was the daughter of the famous Madame Marie Curie.

The Joliot-Curies were busily engaged in bombarding such light atoms as boron, magnesium, and aluminum with alpha particles, a type

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of radiation produced by some radioactive substances. This sort of work had been initiated by Rutherford, who was the first to observe that atomic nuclei were altered as a result.

An alpha particle is made up of 2 protons and 2 neutrons, and when it strikes the nucleus of a light atom, it can happen that the 2 neutrons along with 1 of the protons will remain in the nucleus while the other proton flies away. Rutherford noted this first in 1919, when he bombarded nitrogen with alpha particles. The nitrogen nucleus has 7 protons and 7 neutrons. If 1 proton and 2 neutrons from the alpha particle are added, you have a product containing 8 protons and 9 neutrons.

A nucleus with 8 protons and 9 neutrons is that of oxygen-17, which is rare in nature, but stable. Thus, Rutherford had converted nitrogen-14 to oxygen-17 and had accomplished the transmutation process of changing one element into another that had eluded the early alchemists.

The Joliot-Curies obtained similar results. In 1933, they found that bombarding aluminum-27 (13 protons and 14 neutrons in the nucleus) with alpha particles resulted in the addition of 1 proton and 2 neutrons to the nucleus, producing one with 14 protons and 16 neutrons. This is the nucleus of silicon-30, a rather rare but stable isotope of silicon.

Naturally, this meant that, as usual, protons were ejected by the bombarded aluminum. That was not surprising at all. But then the Joliot-Curies noted that, in addition to the protons, a certain quantity of neutrons and positrons were also being emitted. This was a little more surprising, but not too much so.

A neutron (which had been discovered only four years earlier) is very similar to a proton except that the neutron has no electric charge while the proton has a charge of +1. The positron (discovered only two years earlier) is very light compared to either the proton or the neutron and, like the proton, has a charge of +1. Combine the neutron and positron and you have a particle that is still about the mass of a neutron and has a charge of +1. In short, you have a proton. Therefore, if, as a result of a nuclear reaction, a proton is formed, it is conceivable that, in the same nuclear reaction, a neutron plus a positron, which, together, are the equivalent of proton, may also be formed.

So far, so good. In early 1934, the Joliot-Curies noted that when the alpha particle bombardment stopped, the production of protons and neutrons stopped also, and at once. That was to be expected. However, here came the big surprise. The production of positrons did *not* stop. It kept right on going, at a rate that diminished with time in a way charac-

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teristic of a radioactive transformation.

What was happening?

The Joliot-Curies had supposed, at the start, that the aluminum atom ejected a neutron and a positron at the same time, and that since this was equivalent to ejecting a proton, the aluminum-27 was changing to silicon-30 either way. The fact that the neutrons stopped being ejected and the positrons kept on coming might well mean that the two particles were produced independently. Suppose, then, that a neutron was produced and ejected first.

This would mean that when the alpha particle struck the aluminum-27 nucleus, 2 protons and 1 neutron were absorbed, while the second neutron was ejected. The 13 protons and 14 neutrons of aluminum-27 would thus be converted into 15 protons and 15 neutrons and that would be a nucleus of phosphorus-30.

Phosphorus-30, however does *not* exist in nature. Phosphorus atoms that do exist in nature occur in only a single atomic variety — phosphorus-31 (15 protons and 16 neutrons). No other isotope of phosphorus exists in nature.

Yet suppose phosphorus-30 were formed. It would have to be radioactive, for that would explain why it doesn't occur in nature. Even if it were somehow formed, it would break down speedily.

In fact, what if the phosphorus-30 breakdown was accompanied by the ejection of positrons? That would explain why positrons kept on being ejected after the alpha-particle bombardment had ceased. The alpha-particle bombardment formed phosphorus-30 faster than it could break down so that a certain small concentration would be built up. Then, after the bombardment stopped, the built-up phosphorus-30 would continue to break down.

From the rate at which positron-formation fell off, it could be calculated that the half-life of phosphorus-30 is about 2.3 minutes.

Positron-ejection is very much like beta-particle ejection. Beta particles are speeding electrons after all, and a positron is exactly like an electron except that the former has a charge of +1 and the latter one of -1.

When an electron is ejected from a nucleus, a neutron with a charge of 0 is converted into a proton with a charge of +1. In other words, to have a nucleus lose a negative charge (by emitting an electron) is equivalent to saying it has gained a positive charge (by converting a neutron to a proton).

Positron-ejection would naturally do the reverse of electron-ejection,

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since a positron is the opposite of an electron. If the ejection of an electron turns a neutron into a proton, the ejection of a positron turns a proton into a neutron. If phosphorus-30 ejects a positron, then its 15 protons and 15 neutrons change into 14 protons and 16 neutrons and it becomes silicon-30.

What it amounts to, then, is that if aluminum-27 is bombarded with alpha particles, it can change into silicon-30 directly, or it can change into silicon-30 indirectly by way of phosphorus-30. The Joliot-Curies, therefore, were the first to demonstrate the existence of "artificial radioactivity." The importance of this was recognized at once and, in 1935, they were awarded the Nobel prize in chemistry.

Once the Joliot-Curies had shown the way, other investigators followed in their track. Radioactive isotopes (or "radioisotopes") were found in large numbers, and, eventually, every single element on the list, with no exceptions, was found to have radioisotopes.

Obviously, radioisotopes are likely to make better labels than do stable, but rare, isotopes. A stable isotope can only be detected, and its concentration measured, by mass-spectrometry, which is rather tedious and difficult. Radioisotopes can be detected, and their concentration measured, much more quickly and easily.

Hevesy was the first one off the mark here, too. In 1935, he studied the uptake by plants of phosphate ions from solution, using radioactive phosphorus as the tracer.

Of course, there are difficulties involved in using radioisotopes. What if the half-life is short?

As I said, phosphorus-30 has a half-life of 2.5 minutes. Obviously any experiment using phosphorus-30 must be completed from beginning to end in a few minutes, or the phosphorus-30 will have dwindled to the point where it is impossible to detect with sufficient accuracy. Fortunately, phosphorus-32, another radioisotope of the element, has a half-life of 14.3 days, and that is much better.

From the standpoint of biochemistry, the five most important elements are hydrogen (#1), carbon (#6), nitrogen (#7), oxygen (#8) and sulfur (#16). For sulfur, there is the convenient radioisotope sulfur-35, with a half-life of 87 days.

Hydrogen seemed a more puzzling problem. In fact there might be reason to suppose that even if all the other elements had radioisotopes, hydrogen might not. After all, it is the simplest of the elements. How could it break down?

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In fact, the common hydrogen nucleus is made up of 1 proton and nothing else. it would have to be stable. Even when hydrogen-2 (deuterium) was discovered, with a nucleus of 1 proton and 1 neutron, that was stable, too.

Once deuterium was discovered, however, it was used by scientists in a number of different ways. For one thing it could be used for neutron bombardment.

Neutrons are electrically uncharged and cannot be accelerated as charged particles can be. That means that if you have a source of neutrons, you must take them at the energies with which they are produced, since you can't accelerate them to higher energies. Usually, the energies you find are not the ones experimenters wanted.

A deuterium nucleus, or "deuteron," made up of 1 proton and 1 neutron can be accelerated, since it has a charge of +1. Atomic nuclei can therefore be bombarded with speeding, energetic deuterons.

As it happens, though, the proton and neutron in the deuteron are held togther weakly in comparison with the bonds present in other nuclei. As a speeding deuteron approaches a nucleus, then, the nucleus (which is positively charged) repels the proton half. The bond between the proton and the neutron may then be broken, so that the proton may be forced away from the nucleus and sent speeding off in a different direction. The neutron, however, being uncharged, would be unaffected by the electric charge on the nucleus and would continue speeding forward. It might then strike the nucleus and merge with it.

In 1934, an Australian physicist, Marcus Laurence Elwin Oliphant (1901-), bombarded deuterium itself with speeding deuterons. Every once in a while, the proton of the deuteron was forced to break away while the neutron traveled onward, striking the deuterium nucleus (a low-energy deuteron) and remaining. The result is a nucleus with 1 proton and 2 neutrons. This is "hydrogen-3," or, as it is often called, "tritium." Oliphant is its discoverer.

Hydrogen-3, it turned out, is radioactive, and it is the only known radioisotope of hydrogen. It breaks down by ejecting an electron (a beta particle) so that within its nucleus, a neutron turns into a proton. The resulting nucleus, with 2 protons and 1 neutron, is helium-3, an extremely rare nucleus, but stable.

The half-life of hydrogen-3 is 12.26 years so it can easily be used as a radioisotopic label.

The luck biochemists have had with sulfur and hydrogen failed them,

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however, with oxygen and nitrogen.

The least unstable nitrogen radioisotope is nitrogen-13 (7 protons and 6 neutrons) which has a half-life of only 10 minutes. The situation with oxygen is even worse. The most nearly stable oxygen radioisotope is oxygen-15 (8 protons and 7 neutrons), and its half-life is only about 2 minutes.

Neither one is very useful as a tracer, since they are too evanescent. What's more, it is as certain as anything can be, that we will never find a radioisotope of either oxygen or nitrogen that will have a longer half-life. For those two elements, then, we are forced to stick with the rare, stable isotopes, oxygen-18 and nitrogen-15 as labels. (There's no point in complaining, though. We are lucky to have them, and they have served biochemists well.)

For a while, it didn't seem that carbon, *the* most important element in biochemistry, would be any better. During the 1930's, the least unstable carbon radioisotope known was carbon-11 (6 protons and 5 neutrons), which had a half-life of 20.4 minutes.

This was short, but for carbon's sake, biochemists did their best to work with it. They devised experiments that could be completed within the hour. There were certain advantages to this. If a short experiment is successfully designed, it can be repeated over and over again, sometimes under varying conditions, without too much loss of time. Then, too, a short-lived radioisotope produces copious radiation (that's why it's short-lived) so that an exceedingly small amount is all that needs to be used. Still, even though some successful work was done with carbon-11, the opportunities were limited.

It was known that carbon-14 ought to exist and that it should be radioactive. Among the lighter elements, there is only one stable isotope for any given total number of protons and neutrons in the nucleus. Nitrogen-14 (7 protons and 7 neutrons) is stable, so carbon-14 (6 protons and 8 neutrons) was sure to be unstable. It was expected to break down by emitting an electron and changing a neutron to a proton. That would produce nitrogen-14.

The only argument was over what the half-life of carbon-14 might be. During the late 1930's, chemists felt that the half-life might be of the order of fractions of a second. They kept trying to isolate some form of radioactive breakdown that could be attributed to carbon-14 and kept failing. With every failure, it seemed more certain that carbon-14 must be very short-lived and that that was why it couldn't be isolated.

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Then, in 1939, a Canadian-American biochemist, Martin David Kamen (1913-) set about painstakingly investigating every nuclear reaction that might possibly give rise to carbon-14. He made use of bombardments in which protons, deuterons, or neutrons were the bombarding particles, and boron, carbon or nitrogen were the atoms being bombarded.

Until early 1940, the results were negative, and then Kamen bombarded carbon with deuterons of a particular energy and obtained a weak radioactivity. The radioactivity accompanied the carbon in all its chemical changes, and therefore had to involve a carbon isotope.

To have produced a carbon isotope, the deuteron would have had to add its neutron to the carbon nucleus and have its proton go its own way. An added neutron would leave the element changed but increase its mass number by 1. Thus, carbon-12, the common isotope, would be changed to carbon-13, which is also stable, though rare. Carbon-13, itself, however, would be changed to radioactive carbon-14.

If this were so, it would be best to increase the quantity of carbon-13 in the carbon being bombarded. This was done, and when the enriched carbon was bombarded with deuterons, the radioactivity was much strengthened. At last, carbon-14 was obtained in quantities large enough to be studied, and a virtual shock-wave went through the world of biochemistry. Carbon-14 turned out to have a half-life of some 5,700 years!

With carbon-14, experiments could be carried out that would last for a lifetime if one wished, and there would be no problem in dealing with the radioactivity. It would not vanish and it would remain almost constant, in fact.

There was still a catch, though, even as the 1940's opened. Radioisotopes could only be formed in small quantities, and they were therefore very expensive. However, even as carbon-14 was discovered, scientists were working on uranium fission, and by the end of World War II, nuclear reactors had been devised.

A nuclear reactor is a source of vast numbers of slow neutrons produced by fissioning uranium atoms. These slow neutrons are easily captured by atoms of many types, and elements of higher mass number are thus formed. Or, a neutron may be absorbed and a proton or an alpha particle may be ejected, so that a radioisotope of another element might be formed. In this way, useful radioisotopes for any of the elements of

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biochemical significance can be formed, including hydrogen-3 and carbon-14, and tracer work entered its golden age.

Carbon-14 was, of course, the most important of the radioisotope tracers, and an example of its triumphs came in connection with photosynthesis, but I'll leave that for some other day. Instead, I will take up, next month, two other important aspects of carbon-14 that do not involve ordinary tracer work at all.

"The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.."

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In 1968, we published Charles Grant's first story, "The House of Evil." Since then, he has of course developed into one of the field's premier fantasy and horror writers. He tells us that the story you are about to read is his 100th short story sale, and we are delighted to offer it here.

Crystal

BY
CHARLES L GRANT

The shop wasn't a very smart one as shops in the district went, but Brian had weeks ago learned that it catered mostly to tourists and the occasional country family in town for a holiday, and so needed only a bit of flash, a few items with the royal family on them, and a dozen different street maps from which to choose the best way of getting lost.

Now, Brian, he thought then in a silent scold, that's not the way to think, is it? This is London, boy, and you're practically a native. You're not going to get lost, you're not going to be shortchanged, you're not going to be taken for a foreigner at all. Until, that is, you open your fat Yank mouth.

His reflection in the shop window smiled wryly at him, and he nodded to it just as a young man and his girl wandered by, saw him, and gave him a puzzled look, the boy lifting an eyebrow and the girl shoving a laugh into her palm. Startled, he watched them until, if he wanted to watch them further, he'd have to look directly at their backs; so he stuffed his hands into his pockets and returned to his contemplation of the display.

Seeing nothing.

Hearing nothing of the homeward-bound traffic grumbling past him on High Holborn.

Until a face in the window caught his attention. A young woman, striking in a dark-haired, pallid sort of way, and he smiled again, hopes rising, until he realized with a derisive snort it was a picture he was looking at. And not a very good one, at that. Oval, in fading color, framed in cheap silver.

He leaned closer.

No. Not cheap at all. In fact, the frame only appeared to be simple,

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but there around the edges were etchings of long-stemmed roses, so delicately done the sunlight blotted them out until he moved his shadow over their stems. He cocked his head and leaned closer still; he felt his left hand bunching around the roll of money he kept in his trousers; and when a horn blared behind him, he jumped and moved instantly and casually into the store.

The shopkeeper was a rotund man and thickly mustached. He remained behind the rear counter when Brian asked about the picture, saying that if he were interested, he was more than welcome to take it out of the window and bring it into the light. Brian shrugged. He didn't want to appear too stupid, nor too interested. Nevertheless, he made his way slowly back along the narrow aisle, angling sideways between a group of women chattering in Texas-Southern accents about how *darling* everything was and wouldn't Cousin Annie just *love* a picture of that *adorable* Prince Andrew. Carefully, he reached around a newspaper display and picked up the frame.

It was heavy, much heavier than it had a right to be.

He turned it around and looked at the portrait.

Narrow face; narrow chin; wide, dark eyes that matched the dark hair curling under her jaw. The hint of a lace-trimmed velvet bodice. Bare shoulders. Nothing more.

Attractive, he decided, but with an odd distance in her gaze.

He hefted it. Tilted it to the light when he felt the shopkeeper watching. Frowned as if in concentration and debate, shrugged as if in reluctant decision, and carried it back, waiting patiently as the women fussed with the unfamiliar coinage, finally giving up and handing the man some bills, their faces sharp in daring him not to give them their due.

Brian grinned, and the man grinned back over a blue-tinted head. One of the ladies turned around and glared, obviously taking him for a local and extending the dare to him.

But he only nodded politely and handed over the picture as soon as the women moved on, chattering again, exclaiming, and wondering aloud why the English, with all their experience, didn't have money like the Americans, it would make things so much easier all around, don't you think?

"You must get tired of it, Mr. Isling," Brian said sympathetically as he pulled out his roll and coins and gave him the correct amount.

"Not so much anymore, Mr. Victor," was the smiling answer. "At least I don't have to put my feet up in a hotel, do I, when the day is over."

"Oh, they're not that bad." But his expression put the lie to it, and the man laughed, put the purchase in a paper bag, and thanked him for the sale.

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Halfway up the aisle, Brian turned. Do you know who she is?" he asked.

"Who?"

He held up the bag.

"No. Not really, that is, There's a name on the back. Crystal. I reckon that's either her or the artist."

"Do you get many of them?"

Isling hesitated, then shook his head. "Only one of that lot, far as I know. We get them now and then, the odd piece. Sometimes they last until I junk them; sometimes they go as soon as I put them out."

"And this one?"

"Put it out this morning."

"It must have known I was coming."

The shopkeeper's laughter followed him to the street, where he turned left, elbows in to protect his ribs from his dubious prize, trying to decide if he should go back to his room now, or find someplace to eat and examine his folly there. Wherever it was, it would have to be someplace quiet, someplace that would allow him peace, to figure out why the hell he'd spent so much on a whim.

He slid the frame just far enough out of the bag to take a puzzled look, heard someone scream a warning, and looked up in time to see a black, square-framed taxi jump the curb and head straight for him. He shouted and leapt to one side, lost his balance and fell over the curbing into the street. The taxi plowed on, scattering pedestrians and postcard displays until it slammed through the window of the shop he'd just left. There was a man's yell, a faint whump, a whiff of gas, and suddenly the pavement was alive with smoke and fire.

Brian immediately crossed his arms protectively over his head, half expecting that any moment some fiery shard of metal would soon crash down on him, that glass lances would shred him. And he stayed on his side until he heard someone asking him if he was all right. Cautiously, he lowered his arms. Sirens were already blaring, and through the thick smoke he could see figures rushing about the shop with fire extinguishers hissing.

"Do you need help?"

He didn't object when hands cupped under his arms and pulled gently, until he gathered his feet beneath him and stood. He swayed a bit, and coughed. Someone brushed grime from his denim jacket, a piece of something from his hair, then led him away from the scene, talking all the while about the danger of living in the city these days, and if it wasn't the damned IRA or the damned Arabs, it was the damned taxis going wrong and he'd be damned if he didn't think the damned Apocalypse was coming.

Brian's eyes stopped their watering, but his right leg still hurt where he'd cracked it on the street, and his right shoulder felt as if it had been yanked from its socket. He groaned

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and gripped his arm, tensing with the anticipation of feeling the flow of blood.

"You need a doctor?"

After a moment he shook his head, closed his eyes tightly, and willed the pain to go away, come back later when he wasn't shaking so much. When he opened them again, his benefactor was gone and the police were already cordoning off the area. He walked off, still a bit wobbly but able to convince those who saw him that he wasn't drunk or crazy.

And it wasn't until he'd cut through Russell Square several minutes later and was heading toward his place near the university that he realized the bag was still clamped under his sore arm. A sign, he decided, and leaned against the nearest lamppost, took the picture out, and smiled at the woman.

"Crystal," he said, "why do I get the feeling you've just saved my life?"

"Don't flatter yourself, boy. It was a mistake."

Brian nearly dropped the package at the voice, then whirled and scowled. "Melody," he said, "you could have taken ten years off me, sneaking up like that."

Melody Tyce only laughed, parts and sections of her rippling in accompaniment as she tried to get a closer look at what he was holding in his hand. "You talking to pictures now, Brian?"

Quickly, he tucked Crystal back into her bag and tucked it back under his arm. "None of your business."

She laughed again and pushed coquettishly at the mass of blonde hair that ill-framed her pudgy face. She was much too large for so much atop her head, and, he thought, for the snug clothes she wore. It made her seem as if she were trying too hard, which he knew wasn't the case where he was concerned. She was a good-natured woman who had taken him under her wing, sending him to the restaurants where meals were good and just as good with their prices, to the shops where his clothes wouldn't look as if they'd fallen off the rack, and to the clubs where he might, were he more aggressive, even meet a young lady.

"Oh, come on," she persisted. "What do you have? Not one of *those* things, is it?"

"No," he said with a grin. "Something I picked up in a shop, that's all."

"Ah. A souvenir."

"Yes. Sort of."

She nodded. "Better. You're forgiven, then, for talking to yourself."

"I wasn't talking — " He made to ease her away, to give him some room, and the package slipped to the pavement. Instantly she pounced on it, and since the picture had slipped out of its covering, she was able to take a good look as she handed it back.

"Well, I'll be damned," she said.

"What?" He moved to her side

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and peered at the woman's face over her shoulder. "You know her?"

"I should." Her thumb ran along the frame, tracing the roses, while she sighed. "Where'd you get it, Brian?"

He told her.

She sighed again.

"Hey, what?" he said as she pushed it back into his hands and walked off. "C'mon, Mel, what gives?"

Midway down the block she stopped, shaking her head and looking up at the clean white facade of what had once been a Georgian townhouse, was now only one of several bed-and-breakfast hotels that lined the narrow street.

"Mel, what do you mean, you should know her?" Then he followed her gaze into the top-floor window, over the narrow entrance. "No," he said. "No, you're kidding."

"Clear as day, it's her."

They took the steps together, and he held the door, frowning but not wanting to push her with more questions. What she was claiming was clearly absurd — that the picture was of her mother, who lived in a large room two floors above the entrance and seldom showed herself to any of the guests. It couldn't be. She was, by his estimation after the one time he had seen her, well over eighty and almost as large as Melody herself.

At the back of the square foyer now used as a lobby was a large desk. Melody hurried behind it and dropped into a wing-back chair, slapped her hands on the blotter, stared at him without expression. "I gave that to Ben two weeks ago," she said. "Told him to take it to a friend that has a shop in Salisbury. He promised me he would."

"But why, if it's true?"

"Oh, it's true, Brian. And the why of it? Because she don't like seeing herself like that anymore. It makes her — "

"Oh," he said. "Oh. I see." And he supposed that seeing his own photograph, taken now, thirty years in the future would probably drop him into an unstoppable depression. "Oh, hell."

"It's all right," she assured him. "I should have known it wouldn't be that easy. Bad pennies, if you know what I mean."

He said nothing more, just gave her a sympathetic look and started up the winding staircase toward his own room on the middle floor. And once inside, he flopped into his armchair and puffed his cheeks, blew out a breath, and set the picture on the table beside him.

"So," he said as he unlaced his shoes and kicked them under the bed. "So that's what you looked like, you old bat. Not bad. Mind telling me what happened?"

He laughed shortly, hoisted himself back up, and stripped to his underwear. There was a basin in one corner, and a mirror over it in which he saw the spreadings of a pair of

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marvelous bruises — one on his shoulder, another reaching up over his hip. Suddenly he began to tremble, and a chill of perspiration slipped over his chest and back. He coughed, he choked, and he barely made it to the toilet at the end of the hall before he lost his breakfast, and the bit of lunch he'd taken during his walk.

Ten minutes later he lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

Delayed reaction, he thought, and almost immediately fell asleep.

Dreamless.

Long.

Waking shortly after sunset when a screech of brakes made him sit up, his breath short and his hands clenched into white-knuckled fists.

"Jesus," he said, reached up and switched on the tiny light affixed to the wall. The floor-to-ceiling windows were open, the curtains drifting with the breeze; the armchair a dark blotch in front of a fireplace bricked over, its shadow on the wall slightly wavering, as if under water.

He rubbed his eyes until they burned, then forced his fingers to relax, groaning when the aches, dull and throbbing, erupted along the side. He wondered if he ought not to see a doctor, and by the time he had decided it wasn't worth it, he was sleeping again.

Dreaming, this time, of phantom taxis and phantom drivers and old Ben Isling crushed to death behind his counter.

He spent most of the following day in the hotel, watching television, eating sandwiches, fussed over by Melody, who told him more than once that if he wanted to get rid of the picture, she could take it out to her friend in Salisbury herself. The other guests wandered in and out of the cozy front room, clucking, shaking their heads, giving him all the sympathy he required, until Melody finally laughed and told him he ought to charge admission.

But Bess didn't come. Bess Orbache, a young American like himself, using the city as a way to bury her past. Or so he thought each time she refused him a history, or even a hint. He hoped she was all right; he knew, however, she was more than all right, she was competent and confident and didn't need him for a squire.

On the third day, he walked to get the stiffness from his leg, had dinner and too much to drink at a pub he haunted, and finally, when there was no place to go, went to his bed.

And dreamed of taxis and explosions and something crawling black and wet through his window.

He woke with a start, blinking sleep away without sitting up. A few deep breaths to calm him, and he turned his head to the left, and saw the door to his room several inches ajar.

God, he thought, and felt himself grow cold, not once moving his gaze from the bit of hallway he could see.

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There was no one out there, not anymore, but he held his breath anyway, against the odd chance.

This is silly, you know, he told himself when he felt his shoulders trembling; you're just the victim of a beautiful woman who wanted to see your body before asking you to her suite at the Savoy for a night of—

Someone screamed.

"Jesus," he said, and leapt to his feet, wincing at the ache in his bruised leg as he stumbled back into his clothes. By the time he was dressed, the hallway was filling with those guests still at home, most of them crowding to the center stairwell. As best he could tell from the babble and the whispers, someone on the floor below had been discovered in his room; murder, it was said, a throat cut and enough blood to paint most of one wall.

A young woman, shorter than he, her long brown hair touched prematurely with strands of gray, swayed a bit as the descriptions grew more graphic, and he put a hand on her back to prevent her from falling.

"I'm all right!" she snapped, then looked over her shoulder. "Oh, sorry, Brian. I thought it was Mr. White."

He smiled, tapped her once with a finger, and they backed away to a free corner. "Mr. White? Thanks a lot, Bess. It's just what I needed."

Her answering smile was more forced than easy, the faint spray of her freckles nearly vanishing in the attempt, and he leaned back against the wall, a hand in a hip pocket. Thurmond White was a lone traveler — fresh from Virginia, though he had no identifiable accent — with one eye out for bargains and the other out for lonely women. Bess, it seemed, was one of his prime candidates for either category, and twice Brian had to rescue her in the lobby by pretending they had a date. White hadn't been gracious, and hadn't given up the fight.

Bess, for her part, allowed him to take her to dinner both times, once more to the theater, once again to a film. Their good-nights were so chaste he wanted to scream.

They said nothing as they watched the dozen or so guests shift around for better views; they tensed when they heard the sirens stop outside, heard footsteps on the carpeted stairs, heard voices raised in authority.

"I don't think I want to talk to the cops," he said at last, and with a nod for her to join him, slipped back into his room.

She took the chair at once; he sat cross-legged on the bed.

"I heard you nearly caught it the other day," she said, staring around the room as if it were light-years different from her own down the hall. "Are you all right?"

He explained what had happened, didn't bother to exaggerate the injuries he'd received. She wasn't that impressed, though she didn't seem to

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mind that he couldn't stop looking at the T-shirt she wore — a thin one, and of a solid black that accentuated the tan of her bare arms and the curve of her chest. With a few variations, it was what she had worn since the first day he had met her; he assumed she had several of them and knew what they did.

Then he told her about waking up and finding the door open.

"Oh, my God," she said, sitting suddenly forward. "Brian, do you realize you could have been a victim? My God!" She scanned the room again, this time checking the shadows for a lurking killer. "My God!" And she was grinning.

A flare of light when the wind parted the curtains, and she looked to the side table and saw the picture of Crystal.

"Melody's mother," he said to her unasked question.

"You're kidding. That old bat?"

"So she says."

Bess reached for the frame, changed her mind with a frown, and suggested that he make sure he kept his door locked. When he told her he did, she reminded him it had been open.

"Or opened," she amended with a sly, menacing smile.

"Right," he said. "Now look, I don't know about you, but living dangerously makes me hungry."

"I already ate."

"Eat again."

She looked at him, considered, and nodded, then took his arm, stroked it once, and led him into the hall, where they were stopped by a constable who asked them if they'd mind looking in at the downstairs lounge, just a few questions, no problems, the inspector would take only a moment of their time.

Melody Tyce met them on the landing and looked at him strangely.

The inspector took exactly ten minutes, thanked them, and took their names.

"I'll be damned," Bess said as they walked out to the street.

"I'm not surprised," he said. "Sooner or later one of his women was bound to catch on."

"You knew him well?" she asked dubiously.

"No. But White was the kind of guy . . . I don't know. The kind of guy who just travels around, seeing what he can get from where he is before going somewhere else. I don't know. Old before his time, you know what I mean?"

"Sure," she said, skipping a step. "Decadent."

He thought about it, and shook his head. "No. Just lost, I think."

"Ah," she said. "Very profound."

Maybe, he thought, and wondered if she knew how much the description seemed to fit him. If she did, she said nothing, and once their meal was over, they walked home in silence, not holding hands, not brushing arms,

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and when she skipped up the steps to her room he stood in the foyer shaking his head.

Was it something I said? he thought with a grin..

And thought about it again the next morning when Melody acted as if he had just contracted the plague. Her manner was stiff, her eyes blank when she looked at him, and as he headed out for a day trip to the Tower, he looked back and saw her standing int he doorway, arms folded under her breasts.

From Traitor's Gate, then, to the armor museum, he walked through the tour and thought of nothing but Bess. She was getting to him. She was taunting him. The idea she was toying with him got him so mad that he returned to the hotel before he was ready and sat on the steps, waiting for her, ready to demand an explanation of her disinterest.

The sun set.

He went up to his room only once, to change clothes, and turned Crystal's face away when her eyes seemed to follow.

Back outside he sat again, hands on knees, seeing a patrol car pass and remembering Mr. White and Ben. I am, he thought then, pretty damn lucky after all.

A light switched on in a room overhead, and he looked up and back, and saw a shadow behind curtains. Melody's mother, and he rolled his shoulders in a shudder.

Bess showed up just after nine, smiled broadly when she realized he'd been waiting just for her, and nodded when all the dialogues he'd imagined came out as an invitation to a late dinner up the street.

They ate at the nearest Garfunkel's, neither of them wanting to walk very far, neither in the mood for anything fancy. She took a place on the wall-length booth, he the aisle chair. The only adventurous thing they attempted was switching plates when he was unable to face the bland meat he'd been served. And neither of them spoke of more than the cool weather, the bright skies, the tourists who seemed to be crowding into everything and not giving the true Anglophiles a chance to indulge, until Bess looked peculiarly at the veal she'd been nibbling.

"Something wrong?"

"The cheese," she said, her face abruptly pale, the freckles suddenly too dark.

He reached over with a fork and took a bit on a tine, tasted it with his tongue, and shrugged. "Seems all right to me."

She gagged and covered her mouth with her napkin, looking apologetic and near frightened at the same time. When she reached for and failed to grab her glass of water, he half rose and began to search for a waitress, looked back in time to see her slump to one side in the false leather booth. With a cry for help, he kicked back

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his chair and attempted to stretch her out along the seat. She moaned. He muttered encouragement and chafed her wrists, reached around and grabbed a napkin to dip into water when he saw the perspiration breaking over her brow.

A doctor pushed him aside.

Two minutes later she was dead.

Five minutes after the place was closed down, and within the hour he was standing in front of the hotel, looking up at the lighted window where Melody's mother lived. Questioned and released from the scene, the urge to wander had been suppressed in favor of a sudden macabre curiosity. He supposed, if he were inclined to believe in such things, that the portrait was some sort of good-luck charm; and right now it was difficult not to believe. The taxi, White's murder, the rat poison-tainted food; add them up and they tallied deaths that should have been his. Add them another way, however, and they tallied a run of good fortune that had nothing to do with anyone's likeness. Melody had said it herself, in fact — that she had gotten rid of it because her mother didn't like it. She called it a bad penny, which, to Brian's mind, had nothing at all to do with good luck.

The questions shifted as a shadow approached them.

He stepped back toward the curb, not bothering to look away.

The curtains parted just enough for him to see a slant of face, a slash of vivid blue, before they closed again and the shadow backed away.

He almost went in. He almost ran up the steps and slammed open the door. But a sudden image of Bess's stricken face loomed over the stoop, and he turned away and began walking — past buildings that even in the dark seemed a century out of place, past short-skirted girls who giggled softly in the shadows, past theatergoers in fine clothes, and belligerent shills who told him he'd better not wait, mate, if he didn't want to miss the city's greatest show.

He saw none of the neon, none of the headlamps, none of the faces that turned toward him and away.

Good luck, he thought sourly; what the hell kind of good luck was it for Bess, and Mr. White, and old Ben at the shop?

Coincidence.

Poisoned meat.

He was angry at himself for not feeling more sorrow at young Bess's dying, but he had hardly known her except as someone he couldn't have; he felt nothing at all for Thurmond White, in spite of the man's brashness and his ill-mannered ways; and Ben just happened to be standing where he was, at his post in the shop as the taxi crashed through.

Coincidence.

Good luck.

Bad pennies; and he whirled, nearly knocking over an old woman, and

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broke into a run that soon covered him with sweat, had his shirt clinging to his chest, filled his shoes with slimy damp. The dark streets were quiet save for the slap of his soles; the last of the leaves hissed as he passed. Twice he had to dodge cars as he crossed in a street's center; once he had to outrun a dog he'd surprised rooting in garbage.

He ran back to the hotel and stood on the pavement, and when Melody came to the door he only glared and nodded.

She had a sweater cloaked over her wide shoulders, and she fussed with the top button as she came down the steps.

"It's her," he said tightly, pointing at the window.

"I admit, it's unusual."

He could barely see her face, but he could sense her hesitant smile. "Unusual? Christ, Mel, it's impossible!"

She took his hand and tugged. When he resisted, she tugged again. "Won't hurt, Brian. It won't hurt to look."

He shook off her grip, but followed her just the same, into the lobby, up the stairs, through the fire door and around to the front. She knocked and tilted her head, gave him a smile and walked in, and he rode with her on her shadow.

A single bed, a single chair, a dresser on the far wall.

A crystal chandelier that blinded him until he squinted.

Melody stood beside him.

The other woman stood with her back to the curtains.

She wore a red velvet nightdress trimmed in faint gold, a complement to the ebony that spilled over her shoulders. Her face told him she was sixty, perhaps even thirty; her hands told him she was thirty, perhaps even twenty; and she was as far from fat as he was from content.

She was the woman in his picture, framed by the silvered drapes.

"She tries very hard, my granddaughter does," said the woman named Crystal, in a soft, whipping voice. "Her mother was no better."

He heard Melody sobbing; he didn't look around.

"I suspect she took a fancy to you, a little before I did." The smile was brief and cold. "For different reasons, of course. She fancies she loves you."

He did look then, and looked away from the tears; then reached behind him for the doorknob. "You're crazy," he said.

"You're alive," she told him.

He snorted, courage returned when he wasn't looking in her eyes. "Look, lady — "

"You're here," she said quietly, "because you've noplace else to go, isn't that so? No home. No family. You live in the past, and England is perfect for ambitions like that. And so do I, Brian. So do I." The rustle of velvet. "My past, not yours."

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He yanked the door open and stepped into the hall; and once out of the wash of white light, he took a deep breath, and shuddered, and headed for the stairs. It was time, he thought, to move on. Another city, perhaps the Continent. Maybe even go back to the States. It didn't matter as long as he didn't stay here.

Melody hurried up behind him.

"Tote the tab," he said as he climbed toward his room. "I'll be down in a few minutes."

"You don't get it yet, do you?" she said.

"Get it?" he look down. "C'mon, Mel, you know me."

She wiped her nose with a sleeve. "Do you know who had that picture before you?"

"You did. You told me."

"No. Not me. Mr. White."

He blinked, and grinned. "Mel, this isn't the time. I — "

"I killed him."

He fumbled for the banister and lowered himself to the step. "You didn't."

"She was tired of him. With a few exceptions, he was growing to like older women."

"So?"

"Older women, Brian, don't have much time left."

He stood angrily. "Jesus, Mel, what the hell are you pulling here, huh?" His eyes closed, and opened. "Oh, I get it. Your grandmother has the power to take what life is left from a person, right? She then gives that portrait to someone, and it brings them good luck — like not dying when they should." He spread his hands. "No problem, Mel. If it'll make you feel better, I'll leave it behind. O.K.? Are you happy?"

He started up again (*my past*) and reached the landing, then turned around (*not yours*) because he saw the cab, and the blood, and young Bess on a stretcher.

"Let me get this straight," he said to Melody, who was still waiting. "You arranged, somehow, for me to get the picture because Mr. White didn't pick the girls, he picked older women?"

"You were the type," she said. "She always knows the type."

"And" . . . He put a finger to his chin. "And no matter where I go, because of me people are going to die just to keep her where she is."

Melody lifted a helpless hand.

"You," he said, "are insane. So is that imposter in there, or was the old woman the fake?"

He pulled open the fire door—

"Brian, how did you feel when poor Bess was dead?"

—and stepped into the hall, snatched his key from his pocket, and slammed into his room.

He didn't turn on the lights.

He didn't look at Crystal's picture.

He stood at the window and stared down at the street through the gauze of the curtains.

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What a stupid thing to say, he thought, spinning the key in one hand; I felt lousy, I felt rotten, I felt . . .

And he knew then what Crystal wanted.

Not the dead, not the dying, but the fact that good old Brian, like Thurmond White, would never really care.

A polite knock on the door.

"What!" he said as a tour coach drifted by.

"The bill," Melody said. "Do you still want it?"

A pair of young women in jeans and down jackets huddled on the opposite pavement, knapsacks at their feet, and they were studying a map.

"Brian?"

"No," he said loudly, and parted the curtain.

One of them looked up and saw him, poked her companion, and they smiled.

He heard Melody shift the picture so it faced his bed.

"Brian, she's waiting."

Girls, he thought; they're not much older than girls.

He watched them without expression, watched their flirting and their intent, and when he nodded at the last, the light in the room above switched off, and he waited.

Listening to the girls hurry over to the door.

Listening as Melody left to let them in.

Waiting, and sighing, because he didn't feel a thing.

Coming soon

Next month: QUEENMAGIC, PAWNMAGIC, a fascinating novella by the always inventive **Ian Watson**. Plus stories by **Rudy Rucker, George Alec Effinger** and others.

The October issue will be our 37th anniversary all-star issue, featuring new stories by **James Tiptree, Jr., Lucius Shepard, Frederik Pohl, Rob Holdstock** and others.

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F&SF Competition

REPORT ON COMPETITION 40

In the March issue we asked you to predict some fads of the 1990's, the more outrageous the better. Will someone please explain to the comp editor why you have this weird obsession with nasal and armpit hair? Braided and dyed? Really. Apart from that baffling wrinkle, this contest proved great fun to judge, as you guys came up with some very funny and far-out stuff, viz . . .

FIRST PRIZE

Naming children after money (e.g., Moolah Jones, Eurodollar Schwartz)

Shaved household pets

Wearing, on a chain around one's neck, the ear of a Nicaraguan

Reminiscing with friends about the very worst episodes of *Amazing Stories*

Pleas of not guilty by reason of demonic possession

Widespread usage of the verb "to rambo," as in "Let's go out and rambo some gooks (queers, beaners)"

No sex with anyone, ever

—S. Hamm
San Francisco, CA

SECOND PRIZE

Face dancing

Celebrity food fights

Having your resumé done as a video

Handpuppets as conversational icebreakers

War paint and ritual scarification for corporate executives

Lipsynching to the Watergate tapes

Answering machines for pets (This is Towser — I'm not in the kennel now. Please leave your name and tag number after the bark)

—Pat Cadigan
Overland Park, KS

RUNNERS UP

The Condensed Reader's Digest

Bubble gum that holds its flavor on the bedpost overnight

Talking food, so you never have to dine alone anymore

Owning a small South American nation

Having your very own personal nuclear device

—Richard Hopkins
Mississippi State, MS

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Designer mines, the ultimate in home security

Elaborate communication with car horns

Latvia

Pet of the month club (they take the old one away when you get bored with it)

—Madelaine Hausmann
Walnut Creek, CA

Schlepp dancing, wherein one shuffles about while toting any number of heavy objects

Leather Christmas trees

His and hers conglomerates

Do-It-Yourself long distance call forwarding company kits

John Travolta as James Bond

—Thea Kilosseos
Los Angeles, CA

Restoring antique home computers

Raising your own children

Crew cuts and designer nerd-packs (which will become fashionable after an unknown hacker becomes a national hero by crashing the IRS data base, erasing everything but gross income figures

—Clint Everett
San Diego, CA

Nacho cheese flavored ice cream

Nuclear-powered roller skates

Walking on hot coals

Cable and pay radio

—Gerina Dunwich
Downers Grove, IL

COMPETITION 41 (suggested by Stephen Mendenhall)

Readers are asked to put together two or more fantasy or SF titles (the first word of one title being the same as the last word of the previous title) in an effort to come up with something meaningful and ridiculous, e.g., BEHOLD THE MAN WHO FELL TO EARTH ABIDES.

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by August 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, eight different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks, Runners-up will receive one-year subscription to F&SF. Results of Competition 41 will appear in the December Issue.

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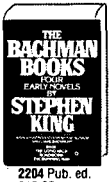

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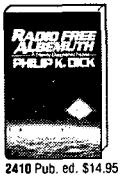

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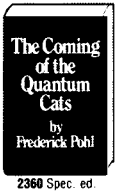

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